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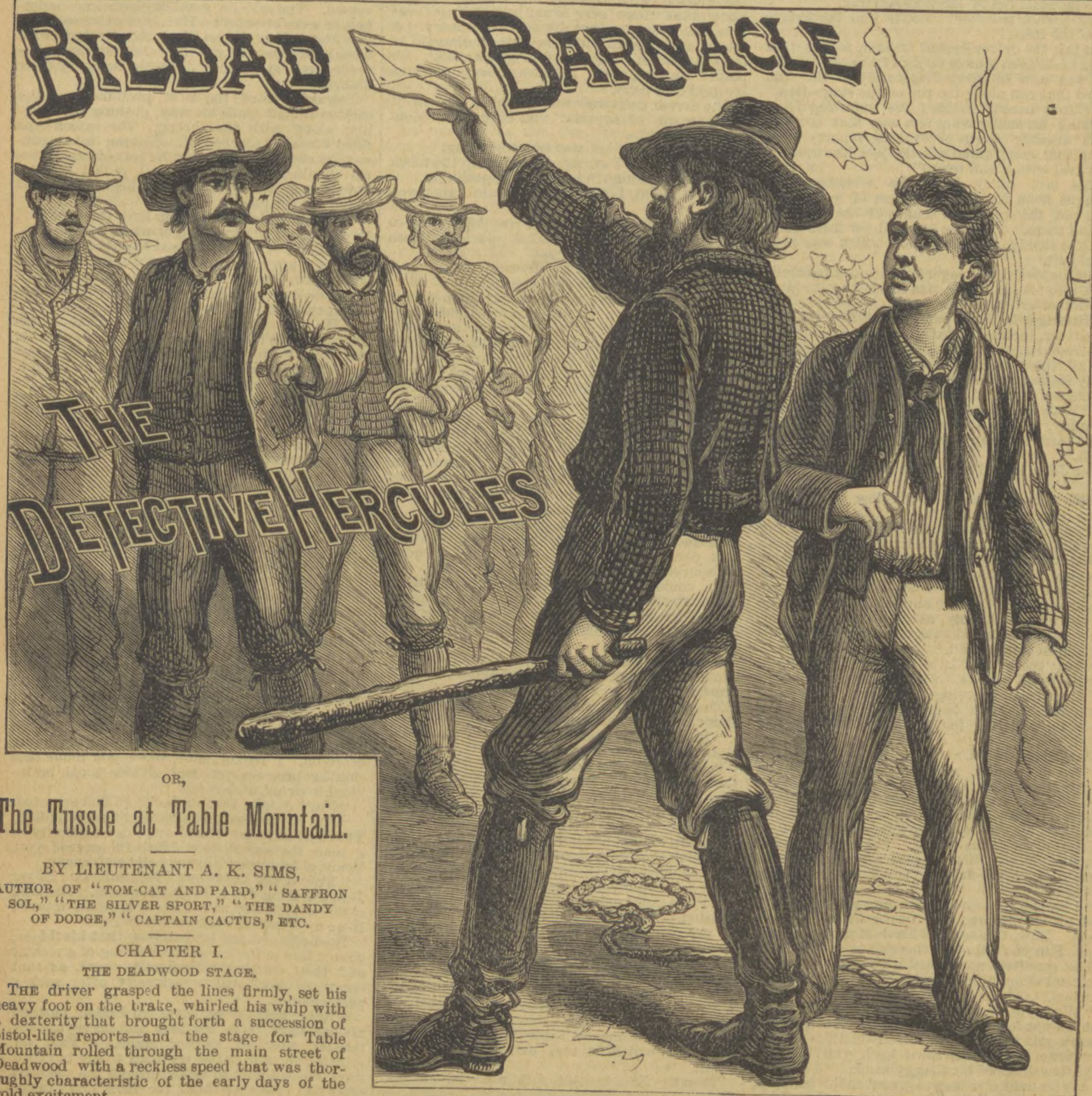
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OR,

The Tussle at Table Mountain.

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SOL," "THE SILVER SPORT," "THE DANDY
OF DODGE," "CAPTAIN CACTUS," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE DEADWOOD STAGE.

THE driver grasped the lines firmly, set his heavy foot on the brake, whirled his whip with a dexterity that brought forth a succession of pistol-like reports—and the stage for Table Mountain rolled through the main street of Deadwood with a reckless speed that was thoroughly characteristic of the early days of the gold excitement.

A large, powerful, but apparently ungainly

HE WAS FASCINATED AND HELD SPELL ROUND BY THE WONDERFUL MAGNETISM
AND SUBLIME DARING OF BILDAD BARNACLE.

man sat by the driver's side. There was an air of rustic verdancy about him that would have been almost comical, if his face had not seemed so open and serious. His heavy, straggling beard was untrimmed, his clothing was coarse and rough, and his hat worn and weather-beaten.

Few, however, gave him a second glance, notwithstanding his quaint appearance. The fierce, wild thrill of the gold fever filled and absorbed men's thoughts to the exclusion of all else. The people of Deadwood had no time or wish, in those days, to give a moment's heed to anything except the sensational and contradictory rumors that constantly filled the air. The rise and fall of empires were as nothing, in their estimation, compared with the opening of new leads and the discovery of new gold fields. Neither would they have wished to entertain even angels unaware, unless those angels came with well-filled pockets.

To this extreme self-absorption was, no doubt, due the fact that the awkward and ungainly giant, who had given his name as Bildad Barnacle, had poked about the town for several days without attracting the least attention.

Even the driver scarcely knew what manner of man was seated beside him, until the stage gave its usual heavy lurch at starting.

"Gee-whiz, pardner! You'll pull the tongue out o' the thing!"

At this the driver looked around, to find that Bildad had been almost thrown from the vehicle, and was now clinging desperately to the iron guard that ran along the top of the stage-deck.

"Climb back!" shouted the unfeeling Jehu, working his snaky whip in a way that brought forth another chorus of stinging reports. "A feller that can't stand a little jerk like that ort to travel with a bull team!"

This last volley from the whistling lash brought from the horses a burst of speed that soon put the sights and sounds of the town far behind them. Then the driver drew them down into the steady, swinging trot, which was their usual gait.

The awkward passenger had climbed painfully back into his place and was staring gravely at the timber-crowned hills.

"Stranger in these parts, likely?" questioned the driver, inclined to talk, now he was no longer on dress-parade. "Monst'ous sight o' pilgrims comin' inter these parts now'days. Hearses fairly loaded all the time. Makes stagin' a better bizness 'n gold diggin'."

"That's what I come fer!" Bildad asserted solemnly, pulling at his ragged beard. "I calculate there's a heap o' money in it, 'thout much work."

The Jehu looked the giant over, from top to toe.

"No offense, mister! But I 'low you'd never make a success handlin' the ribbons. But, you've got an arm fer a bull-skinner; an' there's big dust in that, fer freightin's lively now."

Bildad evidently did not quite catch the Jehu's meaning. "Ribbons" seemed a new term to him, and he had never probably, heard the drivers of oxen called "bull-skinners." But he only winked solemnly, as if to hide his ignorance; and continued with the subject that was uppermost in his mind.

"Yes; there *mus'* be a heap o' money in it, 'cordin' to all reports. But, somehow, I couldn't jes' drap onto the thing back yan. I tromped that endurin' town over fer the bigger part o' three days lookin' fer gold, an' didn't find a speck."

The driver stared.

"An' I couldn't git *anybody* to answer a plaguey question! If they ever was a set o' crazy men they're there. They jes' don't do nothin' but race up an' down that air street contin'ally. It do beat all, the way *they* kerry on!"

Light came to the driver. The pilgrim on the box was not ambitious to secure the honors that come to the stage-driving fraternity; he was a seeker after gold!

"I reckon if they was ever any gold there, it's been all scooped up; so I cut my sticks fer other parts. Now, this town o' Table Mountain, pardner! Kin you tell me if there's any gold *there*?"

The question was asked with such an air of ignorant simplicity that the driver was actually touched.

"Well, yes, there's gold there! Plenty of it; but it's not fer sich as you an' me. An' likewise, there's gold in an' around Deadwood!"

"None in that air town back yan!" with a negative shake of his shaggy head. "I *looked*! It costs a mint o' money to git out to this country, as I know frum 'xperience, pardner; but I kin make it pay if anybody kin. Now, if it took me a hull year to scoop up jes' a meal-sack full, I'd be satisfied!"

"I tol' my folks, when I started, that I'd bring back a bushel o' the truck, if I could kerry it. But that air Deadwood ruther stumped me, pardner; an' a teenty meal-sack full 'u'd do me, *now*!"

The driver could endure no more. He could not restrain his pent-up mirth longer, and gave way to a roar of laughter that almost shook the hills.

Bildad looked hurt and humiliated at this unseemly exhibition of levity.

"Beg pardon!" the driver exclaimed, noticing the look, as he straightened up on the box and wiped the tears from his eyes. "I jest couldn't help it. I reckon, now, you don't know much about minin'!"

"No," replied Bildad, "I don't! But I calculate I could l'arn as quick as the next 'un. Can't be much to l'arn about it, though, as I kin see. You dig it out o' the groun', I reckon, wash the dirt frum among it, an' fill yer buckskin bags. 'Most any fool could do that, if he could on'y find the gold."

"An' you never heerd nothin' 'bout flumes, an' stamp-mills, an' hydrollic minin', an' all that, I s'pose? They may have been a time, stranger, when you could go aroun' an' kick gold out o' the groun' with the toe o' yer boot! I don't know that there ever wus; but if there ever wus, that time's gone by in this country. A man's as li'ble to stumble onto a diamont as onto a pocket; an', as fer pan-washin', it's played out long ago! It takes money to mine fer gold now'days."

The driver delivered this crushing statement with an air of superior and oracular wisdom hard to describe.

Its effect on Bildad was overwhelming.

"An' you can't go aroun' an' scoop the truck up with the pebbles?" he asked, appealingly.

"Ef I could, I wouldn't be drivin' stage, you bet!"

"But I allers heern there was *big* money in gold-diggin'!" declared Bildad, plucking fresh courage from this memory.

"They is!" assented the driver.

Then, qualifying the statement:

"That is, if you're the one lucky man in ten thousan'. Ef you air, you *may* stumble onto somethin' big. Then the chances air you'll have to sell out to some rich chap that's got the money to develop yer find. I've knowed thousan's o' prospectors in my time; an' I never knowed more'n a baker's dozen that got rich at it."

"My advise 'u'd be, ef you ain't got capital, to take the back track fer home. There's more poor men in these hills now than air makin' a decent livin'. Your money 'll be gone 'most 'fore you know it; and then you'll have to commence workin' fer some rich man er comp'ny that's got a national bank to draw on."

The advice of the stage-driver was good, as thousands of disappointed and heart-broken men could have testified, but it did not come with a relish to Bildad Barnacle.

He could not dispute the driver's assertions; but he shook his head in a dismal and doubtful way and resumed his watch of the shifting hills.

A halt was made at noon for lunch and a change of horses.

Bildad ate with feverish speed; and then began a careful search of the earth about the stage-ranch.

The driver noted the action and rallied him about it when the stage was again in motion.

"Didn't think you'd find any of the yaller stuff about there, did you?"

"Naw! Didn't sca'cely expect to. But I thought I'd *look*. When I git to Table Mountain I'm a-goin' to hunt that town over. I *know* I'll find somethin' that's boun' to pay me big!"

The driver did not notice the peculiar emphasis which the giant placed on the last sentence, and plunged into a further elaboration of his ideas and experiences of gold-mining.

"I'm a-goin' to hunt fer it, anyhow!" Bildad insisted. "I'm hyer now; an' if they's any gold in an' aroun' Table Mountain I'm boun' an' determined to find it."

This he repeated over and over at intervals during the remainder of the ride; and with such occasional vehemence that even the passengers within were made fully aware of his purposes and intentions.

Just before sunset Table Mountain and the town for which it was named whirled into sight.

Then the Jehu bustled with renewed energy. The snaky lash whistled and popped, the ribbons quivered, the horses pranced; and amid a cloud of dust and a shower of pebbles, the stage rolled up to the station.

"I hope you'll find what you've come fer!" he exclaimed, in a half-mocking tone, as Bildad descended with heavy awkwardness to the ground.

There was an unwonted flash in the giant's eyes as he answered:

"Thankee, most kindly; an' I *will*!"

CHAPTER II.

A ROCKY ROAD.

BILDAD BARNACLE disappeared from public gaze soon after reaching the town, and did not again show himself until the following morning.

Then he traversed the entire area of Table Mountain, going from point to point with slow deliberation, poking about like a collector of garbage and seeing very much more than he pretended to see.

Very little attention was paid to him during that day. The workmen were busy in the mines and mills, the sports were resting themselves after the dissipations of the night and the legitimate business men were immersed in affairs of trade.

Table Mountain was a dull enough place in the daytime. But, at night, all this was reversed. The saloons, gambling-dens and dance-houses were crowded. The notes of wheezy fiddles and rickety pianos filled the air; and with beastly debauchery and foul revelry men proceeded to debase and defile the image of their Maker.

Toward one of the most prominent of the saloons Bildad made his way, pushing and jostling along with the throng. The saloon was filled when he reached it. Sinking into a convenient chair near the door, he leaned his powerful shoulders against the wall, pulled his hat down upon his forehead and began a careless survey of the place.

"I hope the feller'll drap in hyer this evenin'!" he muttered. "I know right where to find him, but I didn't 'low it 'u'd be best to go there openly. Now, if I kin run onto him so's to make it seem sort o' acks'dental, it'll be jes' the thing. An' I ort to do it in this shebang, fer I 'low that nigh about the hull town's gethered hyer."

"He must know I've come! That stage-driver couldn't keep his tongue, if he wanted to. An' then, I prowled aroun' the place till I was 'most afeard somebody set their dogs on me. Yes; he can't he'p knowin' that I've arriv'!"

He pulled at his tangled beard, and smiled, as he thought over the events of the past few days.

After a time a burly six-footer, a miner by his appearance, stalked up to the bar, slapped down a gold piece and ordered a drink.

Having swallowed it, he turned around, placed his back against the railing, and looked over the crowd. His air of importance and swagger announced that he was a bully.

Pretty soon his roving eyes fell on the ungainly form of Bildad.

"Hol hol!" he howled. "Ef thar ain't a speciment! Lost su'thin', sonny? Wal, ding my cats! Ye look ez solemn ez ef you'd seen yer granny's ghost. Come up an' hev' a drink with the best man in the mines. It'll put some life intew you."

"Thankee most kindly; but I never drink!" replied Bildad, looking the fellow over carefully, from beneath the rim of his slouched hat. "I tol' the folks to home that I wouldn't!"

"Hol! Hol! Told 'em ye wouldn't? Wal, ding my cats! That lays over anything I ever heerd on. I reckon, now, when you made thet sing'lar promise, you hed no idee you'd be invited to drink with me!"

"No, I didn't; that's a fac'!" Bildad assented.

"An' ef you had, you wouldn't er promised! That's what I knowed. Now, I don't giner'ly ax a man the secon' time. But I'll excuse you, 'count o' ignorance an' yer bein' a stranger."

"You don't know me, I reckon? I'm Silver Jim, the King-Pin o' Table Mountain. The cock o' the walk, when it comes to fight an' muscle. Hear me chatter: cuck-cu-cuoee!"

The bully clapped his hands against his thighs, gave a fair imitation of the crowing of a rooster and then strutted ridiculously about, as that barnyard fowl will, occasionally, after such a performance.

"Never heern o' ye," asserted Bildad, pushing his hat back from his face and surveying the boaster with an amused smile. "That air 'crown', though, takes me back to my boyhood days, when I used to wade through the medders after the cattle an' hunt fer hens' nests in the hay."

Silver Jim frowned. He intended his performance to have a depressing effect on the ver-

dant stranger. Instead of that, it almost seemed that the pilgrim was laughing at him.

"Ye ain't intendin' that as any slurs, I 'low? Ef I thought so I'd chaw ye into ribbons. I'm the howlin' catymount frum the head-waters o' the Cheyenne, an' I don't 'low anybody to step onto my coat-tails!

"So ag'in, pardner, I ax you to come up an' take a drink. Remember that Silver Jim don't ax often, but he axes p'intedly; an' the feller thet slights the invertation hez got a rocky road afore him!"

"Don't keer fer nothin', thankee," persisted Bildad, a queer smile hovering over his face. "I come to hunt gold, I did—not to make a whisky bar'l out o' myself."

The coolness of the smiling stranger almost staggered the bully. He had expected that the invitation would be instantly leaped at, as a great honor.

A curious and boisterous crowd had by this time gathered about the two men. Eagerly they watched the bully, wondering what he would now do.

Silver Jim was, at about the same time, also asking himself that question. There was never a bully and braggart who was not likewise a coward in the depths of his heart, and Silver Jim was no exception.

The eyes of the crowd were upon him, or he would have turned the matter aside with a laugh. He could not do that now without forfeiting his reputation.

"Barkeep, set out the likker!" he cried, rushing heedlessly on. "Our friend hyer will drink with me, I know. He can't refuse the honor!"

The bottle was placed on the bar in obedience to this request, and the bully again turned to Bildad.

"Can't do it," the latter asserted, positively. "I promised the folks—"

"Whoop! Look out fer me! I'm comin'!" Silver Jim leaped into the air as he shouted the words, and made a blind rush for the unoffending stranger.

Bildad never moved from his seat! But when the foaming coward was almost upon him, his right hand shot out like a steam-hammer, and the fellow went down with a crash.

The rascal had a hard head, and was up in an instant, bellowing like a mad bull.

By this time Bildad had also gained his feet, and was standing on the defensive, with his back against the wall.

Seeing this, Silver Jim drew a big revolver. He was not permitted to use it, however. Again that heavy right hand shot out, and again the bully measured his length upon the floor.

As he tried once more to struggle to his feet, Bildad darted forward, with remarkable activity for a man of his build. One arm encircled Silver Jim's waist, and the revolver was torn from his hand. Then the giant lifted him above his head, with as much apparent ease as he might have lifted a child, and hurled him bodily through the wide doorway into the stony street.

As he did so he settled back with a grim smile and the muttered remark:

"It 'pears to me that *you* air the one that has traveled the rocky road!"

The fall was a heavy one and Silver Jim did not get up immediately. When he did he crept away, with a limping gait, anxious to hide his defeat and confusion. The rough usage he had received at the hands of the verdant stranger had completely taken the fire and fight out of him.

The result of the contest made Bildad the center of attraction. An admiring and questioning crowd gathered around him, to his evident annoyance and embarrassment.

He fought off their storm of questions and made his way with difficulty to the door.

"I'm a modest man, gents!" he cried, appealingly. "I ain't no fighter ner nothin'. I'm jes' a-huntin' gold, that's all!"

He pushed out into the street, with the intention of seeking a quieter place of resort.

Just then a young man tapped him on the shoulder.

"Come!" he whispered. "I knew you were in town and have been looking for you every place. The stage-driver said you came in last evening. Follow me without letting any one notice that you're doing so. I've something of importance to report!"

CHAPTER III.

SOME REVELATIONS.

THE young man stepped lightly away as he said this, and Bildad Barnacle strode silently after him.

Through alleys and dimly-lighted side streets, the young man took his course, at last stopping in front of a small cottage in the suburbs of the town.

"Rather a cozy place I have here!" he exclaimed, as he inserted a key in the lock and swung the door open. "Cozier, in fact, than I figured on when I first struck Table Mountain. It is necessary, though, as becoming my present station in life."

He ushered Bildad into a little, back room, placed a lighted lamp on a stand and examined the window curtains to see that they were closely drawn.

"Almost too early in the chase to grow suspicious, eh?" he asked, with a laugh, seating himself opposite the roughly-clad giant.

As has been stated, he was a young man, and the light now revealed that he was possessed of a vigorous, manly frame, and pleasant, kindly face. His hair and eyes were dark, and a drooping, brown mustache shaded his firm mouth.

"I've been lookin' fer ye!" Bildad asserted, settling himself comfortably in his easy-chair. "That's what I was doin' at that air likker den."

"And Silver Jim took you for a rustic? Well I'm not sorry you let his pride down a peg. Maybe it will learn him a little sense."

"You came straight from Deadwood, I suppose? I looked for you last night, as soon as I heard you were in town. The stage-driver had great stories to tell about you, for I knew it was you as soon as he described you."

"I 'lowed he would!" said Bildad, chuckling. "An' now, string me the news. I'm dyin' to hear how you're gittin' on!"

"Well, in the first place, I reached Table Mountain about two weeks ago; and, as you'll see before I finish, it's a good thing I came right on."

"Jack Thornton, as you remember, is the man who is holding the Redcliffe Mine. It seems that Mr. Redcliffe died without making a will. Immediately after his death, a woman, claiming to be his widow, but in an appearance from the East. This woman has a daughter who is said to be Redcliffe's child."

"According to the story, as given to the court, this Mrs. Redcliffe was Redcliffe's first and only lawful wife. They separated after living together two or three years, during which time this daughter was born to them."

"No divorce was obtained, but Redcliffe nevertheless remarried. Of this second marriage, or rather pretended marriage, two children were born, a son and a daughter. Of course, assuming the story to be true, these children could not legally inherit his wealth. Fortunately, as we know, it isn't true!"

"When this woman put in an appearance with her claim, Estelle Redcliffe was preparing to enter into possession of her father's estate. The proof produced by the woman—false as it was—was sufficient by the aid of wholesale bribery, to turn Estelle out of possession."

"As soon as the case was decided, the false Mrs. Redcliffe made haste to wed Jack Thornton, who had managed the affair for her and furnished the money."

"The estate consists, principally of the Redcliffe Mine, which is now a valuable piece of property. Thornton at once took possession of the mine, in the name of his wife. The old employees were told to go, and their places given to new men."

"That's why I say it was a good thing I came right on. Estelle has a lover, a nice young fellow, named John Fanshaw. Fanshaw was Mr. Redcliffe's confidential clerk and bookkeeper. Of course he was dismissed; and I hastened to apply for the place. As luck would have it, I was the most available applicant! And so you see before you now, the bookkeeper of the Redcliffe Mine, Mr. Tony Adams!"

Bildad nodded and smiled.

"So that's to be yer handle in this hyer little draymy! Well, it's as good as any, and easy to recollect. Tony Adams! Uh, huh! I mus' jog that air down in my memory. Anything furdur to the p'int? This is gittin' powerful in't'restin'!"

"Well, Estelle is still at Thornton's, though I fancy she is not treated overly handsome. The poor girl has no place to go to, in fact. There is an undercurrent of sympathy for her in the town; but Thornton is a powerful man, financially, since obtaining this property, and there are few who care to gain his enmity by offering the girl a home."

"An' that's the outline o' the case?" said Bildad, frowning in thought. "My boy, we've

got a big fight ahead of us. I won't deceive ye. Money talks, in this country, an' Jack Thornton, as you say, has got a pile! But we kin throw 'em. Jes' how it's to be done, though, I ain't figgered, yit."

"It's a good thing you got that air place. It'll come handy. You're 'most boun' to know what's goin' on in a bizness way. Keep yer eyes an' ears open, and report everything that you think's suspicious. There never was a prowlin' wolf er a crawlin' snake that didn't leave some kind o' a trail; an' Jack Thornton's not likely to be an exception."

"That's what I told myself when I took the position!" asserted the young man, as, with a satisfied air, he tipped his chair back against the wall. "It's a big case, I know, and we'll have a hard tussle before we get to the end of it; but everything so far has worked right into our hands."

"I'm sorry for Estelle. It's a pity for her to be forced to stay in that place. Every hand there must be against her. I could secure her a home somewhere, doubtless, but to do so would draw suspicion against me and I can't afford that, just now. I have tried to think up some way by which that risk could be avoided, but have failed. I could do it, if I only knew whom I could trust. The danger is that I might approach some man who would carry the information straight to Jack Thornton."

"Why not call in this hyer young feller—what-d'ye-call-im—this beau o' hern?" suggested Bildad.

"Fanshaw? I've thought of that! But I don't know where he is. He's keeping mighty quiet, some way; and I've suspected once or twice that he might be laying some kind of a trap for Thornton. I haven't seen Estelle, and I don't care to, yet awhile."

"Well, if we can't fix it, she'll have to stay in the rattlesnake's den until we pull the pins from under it. An' that won't be long!"

"I hope not!" the young man rejoined. "And now, what are your plans? Or, have you any?"

"They're rayther misty yit. Fu'st place, I want to get a posish under Jack Thornton somehow, so's I kin watch the p'izen critter. I've been lookin' and plannin' fer that ever sence I started."

"If you don't know it, I'll tell you that I'm Bildad Barnacle, from the State o' Mizzury; an' I'm in the Black Hills huntin' gold. Some way the truck can't be picked up jes' as I thort it could; an', as I'm gittin' short o' money, I'm willin' to work fer other people until I kin git enough ahead to go it alone. Kin you tell me where I kin find a payin' job?"

He threw his chin forward, and drawled out the last sentence in so plaintive and ridiculous a way that the young man went into convulsions of laughter.

"Wal, now, ole boss, I kin!" he cried, imitating the drawl and the dialect. "Jack Thornton is needin' a man of about your heft and build. He's putting a lot of new machinery in his stamp mill, and I heard him inquire, no longer ago than yesterday, where he could find some good, stout fellows, who weren't afraid that a little lifting would break their backs."

"That's the very chance for you, and a good opening. The work will be heavy, but you're as strong as an ox, and it will not be likely to hurt you."

"That's the very place!" Bildad declared, enthusiastically. "My stren'th will be a powerful recommend. If he's lookin' fer stout men he'll never turn me away, after he sees me lift, onc't."

"It might be a good idea for me to take you down with me in the morning. I could tell him that I ran across you while you were seeking work, and brought you along, seeing how strong you were."

"Don't you do it!" cried Bildad, bobbing his head emphatically. "That'd lay us both open to sp'icion, in case one got ketched. No; we want to be strangers, you an' me! I'll go down in the mornin', an' if I can't work myself into a job, recommends wouldn't do it."

The look that Tony Adams gave Bildad showed how much the young man trusted in him.

"Now, there's one other thing I wanted to say a word er two about, an' then I'll purceed to quit fer to-night."

"That air 'cock o' the walk,' as he calls himself—Silver Jim—what kind of a critter is he, an' is he likely to give me any furdur trouble?"

"No, I don't think he will!" thoughtfully. "And yet, it's possible that he may. He's unscrupulous enough, but he lacks the 'sand,' as they say out here. He might put a knife into your back, though, if he thought he could do it with safety to himself."

"'Bout the way I lumped the feller!" Bildad declared. "I never like to git into a muss with sich critters. I allus feel mean over it arterward. Feel like I'd been handlin' pitch. But there wasn't no way to git roun' that scrimmage to-night."

"He thought that I was a gen'leman frum 'Wayback—an' I am, but not quite so green, mebbe, as I look—an' he b'leaved it'd be safe to straddle me. He'd 'a' done it, if I'd 'a' drunk a bar'l o' likker with him. That was jes' an excuse, I saw he was boun' to find an excuse, sooner er later, an' I 'lowed I mou't as well give him one fu'st as last."

"And, as a result, you laid him out in a way to surprise the natives!" said Tony, enthusiastically. "The fighting men of Table Mountain will be apt to give you plenty of sea room hereafter. These fellows that are always going around with a chip on their shoulders, are, nine times out of ten, arrant cowards at heart."

Bildad smiled, in his dry, peculiar way!

"If they keep out o' my way, I'll be boun' I'll not bother them. If they don't, though, there'll be a fu'st-class ruction ever' onc't in awhile."

"An' now—there, I've ferget yer name! Oh, yes; Tony! An' now, Tony, if you'll 'low me to bunk with ye to-night, I'll promise not to kick the kivers off—an' I'll crawl out so long 'fore ye wake, that you won't know when I'm gone."

The young man was evidently delighted with the proposal; and, a half-hour later, they both retired, to seek the rest they so much needed.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TONGUES OF SCORPIONS.

SINCE his accession to the wealth of the late Mr. Rickard Redcliffe, Jack Thornton went clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. And so, likewise, did his family.

The daintiest dresses and most fashionable garments—albeit they did not become them—were considered none too good or costly for the new Mrs. Thornton and her daughter, Sally.

The world was, apparently, going well with Jack Thornton; and it delighted him to see these female dependents, as he felt them to be, flaunt in silk attire. It added to his standing and dignity in the eyes of the citizens of Table Mountain.

If a pang of regret ever came to trouble him he showed no sign. It is doubtful if he knew the real meaning of the feeling. He was annoyed and disturbed by fears, occasionally;—fears that through some untoward circumstance he might be hurled from his pinnacle of bliss. But as for genuine regret, caused by a knowledge of wrong committed, it is doubtful if he was capable of it.

This morning he sat in the library of the Redcliffe mansion, surrounded by books he never read and had no desire to read, and drummed contentedly with his fingers on his cushioned chair.

He was a sallow, stoop-shouldered individual, of uncertain age, and there was a glitter in his beady eyes that showed the duplicity and treachery of his nature.

He had been studying how he might further humiliate and disgrace the unfortunate young woman who was, nominally, a member of his household; and a plot, that brought chuckles from his lips, had suggested itself.

He had accidentally learned that Estelle Redcliffe, the disinherited daughter, had determined upon leaving the house at the first opportunity. He was willing and anxious that she should do so, but he wanted to send her out into the world with a further blight on her good name. If he could effectually crush her to the earth and totally destroy the confidence of the people of Table Mountain in the uprightness of her character, he felt that the act would lessen the chances that she would ever return and rend him.

So he had prepared a little family dialogue that he proposed to have rehearsed for her especial benefit.

Estelle's room and sleeping apartment adjoined the library, and it was certain that every word uttered therein could be plainly heard by her.

Jack Thornton had not long to drum with his fingers and chuckle; for at that moment Mrs. Thornton and her daughter swept into the room with an air which they intended should resemble the stately grandeur of duchesses.

Mrs. Thornton was a large, florid-complexioned woman, with *parvenue* written on every lineament of her puffy face.

Her daughter, Sally, showed many traces of beauty. But the beauty was marred by a certain soullessness and an affected mannerism.

"Oh, my dears! Glad to see you!" exclaimed Thornton, rising and bowing them to seats. "You both look charming this morning."

"Now, pa, don't be silly!" cried Sally, tapping his shoulder with her fan.

At this Mrs. Thornton giggled and termed him a base flatterer.

"Well, have your opinions, my dears, and I'll have mine! If those gowns don't become you, it's not because they didn't cost money. By the way, where's Estelle?"

Now, Jack Thornton knew full well that Estelle was at that moment in the adjoining room and could hear all he said—in fact could not avoid hearing it—but it was in accordance with his purpose to feign ignorance of that fact.

"Downstairs somewheres!" Mrs. Thornton exclaimed, with a fine scorn that indicated she was speaking of a creature who ought to be regarded as a social leper. "It may be, though, that she's slipped out into town. There's a girl, Mr. Thornton, that needs watching, or she'll throw herself away. You must remember her parentage."

"And she's so unrefined, pa!" chimed in Sally. "I really can't endure her. It gives me the shivers whenever she comes where I am—for I can't help remembering, you know!"

"You should have charity, my dear Sally!" cried Mrs. Thornton, reprovingly. "Estelle can't help it because there is a blot on her escutcheon. Of course it can't be forgotten, but you must really try to exercise charity toward the poor thing."

"That's what I was going to say!" put in Thornton. "The girl oughtn't to be blamed for what she can't help."

"No, pa; maybe she oughtn't. But she can help creeping about the house like a cat! And then, she has *such* an air of affected innocence and simplicity. It's really too provoking. I've half a mind to tell her what I think about it, some day."

As these cruel words fell on her ears, Estelle shrunk from them, as if they were whips of scorpions. Her face flushed hotly, a frightened light came into her eyes and she looked about in a scared way that was pitiful in its pain and mute helplessness.

And what a contrast she presented to the coarse, flashy, overdressed women who were defaming her!

There was a spirit of refined and gentle breeding about her that all the gold of the Indies could not confer. Her face was not radiantly handsome, but there was a purity and sweetness in it that strangely touched the beholder; and her mild and gentle glance held that wondrous lifting power that seems to draw men nearer to the angels.

As for her features, they were delicate, her eyes blue, and her hair—coiled becomingly—was of a lustrous brown. She was dressed plainly, but neatly and modestly.

While she shrunk thus, pained and quivering, those cutting, merciless words continued to descend like cruel whips.

"And I'm told, Mr. Thornton, that she has been meeting that lover of hers, John Fanshaw, in a surreptitious and unladylike way."

"Pshaw, now! You must be mistaken!" Thornton asserted. "She wouldn't do *that*, I reckon."

"But she has, pa!" Sally insisted.

"And he's such a *low* fellow!" declared Mrs. Thornton. "I'm surprised that Mr. Redcliffe should ever have given him employment. But, that's what one might expect from such an indiscretion. Of course you can't expect Estelle to discriminate nicely in an affair of that kind, when everything is considered. But she ought to be spoken to, at least, on the subject. I shall make it my duty."

"Your duty!" echoed Jack Thornton. "Well, you'll do nothing of the kind. If she's meeting that fellow, I'll take a hand in the affair. I won't let her stay in the house an hour unless she promises to send him adrift. Why, the ingrate! And I discharged the scamp on purpose to separate them."

"You'll find she'll not promise!" assured Mrs. Thornton. "She's as stubborn as a burro when she wants to be. And a more ungrateful creature never lived. Here I've permitted her to remain as one of the family, for charity's sake, and she acts as if she thought *she* was conferring the favors. I wish you *would* turn her off, Mr. Thornton. She certainly deserves it. And, then, we'd be relieved of the responsibility of looking after her welfare, for I'm sure she'll

give us all trouble sooner or later. No girl, with her temper and traits and parentage, can be long kept under restraint."

"She shall go as sure as my name is Jack Thornton."

"Now, don't be cruel, pa!" interposed Sally, laying her gloved hand on his shoulder, as if she intended to restrain him from personal violence. "You must not forget that she is a woman, even if she is your one enemy."

"Sally always was tender-hearted!" sneered Mrs. Thornton. "Don't be alarmed, my dear, Mr. Thornton scarcely has the courage of his convictions!"

"I haven't!" howled Thornton. "Try me once!"

"No, you haven't, Mr. Thornton, or you would have dismissed the ungrateful creature from the house long ago. Her presence has been a constant reproach to us, and you know it."

"I didn't intend to speak so plainly, but you have driven me to it."

A rustling noise and a series of sobs came from the other room.

At these welcome sounds, the trio of conspirators smiled meaningly; and forthwith proceeded to sink their poisoned fangs deeper.

"Her charges against us all are the talk!" Mrs. Thornton declared, with fierce bitterness. "And yet, knowing it, you have allowed her to remain day after day under your roof. No, Mr. Thornton, you have not the courage of your convictions!"

And so the changes were rung until the sound of light footsteps announced that Estelle had glided from the apartment.

"Now, follow and watch her!" urged Mrs. Thornton, excitedly. "It is the opportunity of a lifetime. She was in too great haste not to tumble into the trap. Follow, and arrest her, upon any pretext, at the first opportunity. It will not only humiliate her, but will destroy whatever sympathy Table Mountain may have in her cause."

"You bet I'll follow!" exclaimed Jack Thornton, clapping a hat upon his head and hurrying from the library. "And I'll have her arrested, too, or know the reason why."

CHAPTER V.

IN THE NET.

It was a terrible shock to Estelle Redcliffe, when that legal decision was given, disinheriting her and virtually denying her her right of name as well as of heritage. And it came with almost the suddenness of a thunderbolt. True, there was quite an interval of time between the commencement and the close of the snit. But, she had felt so strong in the righteousness of her cause that she had never contemplated the thought that the case might go against her.

It would not have done so had not Jack Thornton resorted to wholesale and lavish bribery and sinister methods.

Even then Estelle, for a time, was buoyed by a hope, amounting almost to assurance, that evidence would be shortly forthcoming which would effectually dispose of the claim of pretenders.

John Fanshaw busied himself in trying to collect such evidence, but the days glided into weeks without any important discoveries, and Estelle became heart-sick.

It was only at the earnest solicitation of her lover that she had consented to remain in the old home, after it passed into the hands of these new occupants. But her presence there seemed barren of results, and she at last determined to seek a home elsewhere. This determination she had made known to Jack Thornton only the previous evening.

As she sat, that morning, in her room, reviewing the past, and turning over in her mind plans for the future, her ears were assailed by the cruel, lashing words detailed in the foregoing chapter.

At almost the first sentence she started to her feet, quivering, excited and filled with indignation.

Then, as the pitiless storm broke, in full force, over her devoted head, she turned, like a fawn at bay.

"Oh, what *shall* I do?" she exclaimed, reeling against the wall and pressing her hands to her hot and throbbing temples.

Once a wild and fierce light came into her eyes; and, with clinched hands, she took a step forward. For a second the impulse was strong upon her to rush into the library and beat down her calumniators with stinging words and accusations of fraud.

She knew in her heart of hearts that Mrs. Thornton was an impostor, an adventuress, and

that Jack Thornton was a scoundrel. The story told in the court-room may have impressed others with the belief that it was true, but, it had not so impressed her. She *knew* it was a base fabrication, and had not hesitated to say so, openly and boldly. As for the imputation it cast on her—it chafed and fretted her, even while she scorned it.

The bold and defiant impulse lived but a second; then she sunk back against the wall, white-faced, panting and trembling.

A frantic desire to escape from the vilification succeeded the bolder feeling. The instinct of flight asserted itself. She did not stop to reason out a course. She wanted to get away from that horrid place. To fly beyond the reach of those wretches.

A succession of heaving sobs, followed by a dash of tears, shook her slight form as a lily stem is shaken by a rain-storm.

With trembling haste she gathered up the few trinkets that were dear to her, grasped her little hand-sachel and tip-toed softly from the room.

She hurried out into the street with feverish speed, only anxious to get as far as possible from the now dreaded house and its abhorred inmates.

She had no clear idea of what she intended to do. Her present step was taken with such precipitation that she had not thought of that.

Her lover had told her that he knew where she could secure a good situation, and had given her the address and the name of the family. In this he was guided by her; for she had desired a position where she might be independent and earn her own way.

But this position was not yet open to her, and would not be for a couple of days. True, she might gain shelter there; and her first thought was to make that attempt.

She did not know where her lover, John Fanshaw, was, that day, or she would have gone to him for advice in the matter. He was, no doubt, in the town, but a long search would probably be required to enable her to find him.

As she staggered up the street, weighted with this burden of thought, and the cruel accusations were yet sounding in her memory, she suddenly recollected a lady who had been kind to her in better and happier days, and who would, she felt sure, give her shelter for her own and her dead father's sake.

The memory came as a helping inspiration at a moment when she was almost ready to succumb and fall fainting from nervousness, exhaustion and despair.

Toward the residence of this lady she turned her tottering footsteps, and hurried along as rapidly as possible.

The sights and sounds of the busy street fell upon blind eyes and closed ears. She saw neither the one nor heard the other. If she passed any of the friends or acquaintances of the olden times, she failed utterly to recognize them. Her spirit was overwhelmed by the bitter tide that had so suddenly poured in upon it.

A clamor of voices behind her grew into a very Babel of confused sounds, but she walked right on. If she noticed it at all, it only served to quicken her pace.

The clamor swept nearer and nearer.

But not until she heard the loud voice of Jack Thornton did she realize that it referred at all to her.

That voice came to her like the knell of doom!

"There she is, Mr. Officer, and I command you to arrest her, in the name of the law!"

Estelle turned about with quaking limbs and a white and startled face.

A snarling crowd was at her heels. A crowd that resembled a pack of mangy curs snapping at a fleeing fawn. At their head was Jack Thornton and a man whom she knew to be an officer.

"I command you to arrest her!" cried Thornton, pointing at Estelle.

The fire of indignation and wounded pride leaped into her tear-filled eyes and burned up the tell-tale drops that glistened there.

"What is the meaning of this outrage?" she demanded, drawing herself up to her full height and flashing him a look of defiance.

"Very pretty!" sneered Thornton. "And well done, too, upon my honor. But I've got you foul, young woman, and stage-acting won't save you!"

"Will you tell me the meaning of this?" she asked, turning to the officer.

"Well, you see, miss—" he began, and then stopped short, for he found his position a most embarrassing one.

He desired that Jack Thornton should think well of him, and he wished to please that now important personage. But when he looked into

the clear, flashing eyes of Estelle Redcliffe his courage failed him.

"Place her under immediate arrest!" howled Thornton. "If you don't, I'll see that you're discharged from the force before night!"

"Yes! Certainly! I intend to, Mr. Thornton. But are you *sure* there is no mistake in the matter? The young lady don't look like a—a—"

"A thief? Well, she is one, whether she looks like it or not. I know what I'm talking about, I tell you! She entered my private safe only a little while ago and took a roll of money from it. I made the discovery almost as soon as she'd left the house. And I'll guarantee the money is on her person, now, for she hasn't had time to hide it."

"You hear the charge!" said the officer, trying to speak kindly. "Under the circumstances it is my duty to make the arrest. Perhaps a little search may show that there is a mistake somewhere."

As that terrible and damning accusation came from Jack Thornton's lips, Estelle became as white as ashes and shook like an aspen leaf. Her limbs became leaden and her tongue refused to perform its wonted office.

As the officer advanced toward her she found herself utterly unable to resist or cry out.

"Examine her sachel first!" Thornton commanded. "A woman always tucks everything into her sachel."

The words liberated the girl's enchained spirit. She gave a cry of horror and took a quick step backward.

As she did so the officer's hand closed firmly on her wrist and the sachel was drawn from her almost nerveless fingers.

In the presence of the gaping crowd the officer opened the sachel, plunged in his hand and *drew out a roll of money!*

Estelle could only stare at it as the fascinated bird stares at the fatal serpent. She knew she had never seen that money before, and yet there it was, and it had certainly been taken from her sachel. It seemed like some deadly exhibition of the black art.

Then the nature of the terrible trap into which she had fallen flashed upon her like inspiration.

The bills had been placed in the sachel by Jack Thornton or his wife; and the bitter words of the morning were a part of the plan! The intention had been to drive her from the house with such precipitation that she would have no time to make an examination of the sachel, which they felt certain she would take with her in her hasty flight. And the plan had succeeded so perfectly that fiends might have laughed over it.

"I never saw that money before!" she pleaded frantically and almost hysterically. "Oh, please let me go! I declare to you that I am innocent of that!"

"A likely story!" exclaimed Thornton, with bitter emphasis. "The judge will think so, no doubt, when you tell it to *him*."

The officer was perplexed. He knew his duty in the premises and yet hesitated to perform it.

"You will have to go with me, Miss Redcliffe!" he said, at last, in kindly tones.

"Oh, no, no!" cried the unhappy girl. "Is there no other way?"

"None that I can see. I'm sorry for you; but that's the only course open to me."

"Oh, move on with her and stop your palaver!" Thornton commanded, brutally. "Let her tell her story to the judge. Then I'll tell mine, and we'll see who'll come out best."

Estelle swayed and reeled as if she would drop in the street. But the officer grasped her firmly by the arm, and thus supporting her, walked with her slowly toward the police court. And the curious and gaping throng streamed along in the rear.

That was a fearful walk for Estelle, and the memory of it haunted her for months and years after.

Her spirit was broken—her heart crushed; a heavy weight seemed pressing down upon her madly-throbbing brain; a sea of fire swam before her aching eyes; her strength appeared to be wholly deserting her; and, like the tolling of a funeral bell, rung the accusing words:

"Thief! Thief! Thief!"

What passed that morning in the filthy, little police court she never fully remembered. She recollected that she denied all knowledge of the possession of the money, of which there was about a thousand dollars. Thornton told his story; and, as no one offered to become her bondsman, she was committed to prison to await a regular trial.

CHAPTER VI.

A MAD ACT.

JOHN FANSHAW was furious with rage and indignation when he heard of Estelle's imprison-

ment. If he had met Jack Thornton in those first moments of his hot anger it would have fared badly with the latter.

He hastened at once to the jail, but was refused admittance. Perhaps the jailer was in Thornton's pay. At any rate he repulsed the young man in a way well calculated to drive him to the verge of madness.

Fanshaw choked down the bitter words that came to his lips, and turned toward the office of the police magistrate. Here he had little better success.

"I can't do anything for you!" the magistrate declared, in a tone that showed he considered the young man's interference a piece of impertinence. "The evidence is all against the girl, and the grand jury cannot fail to bring in a true bill. She left the house in haste, under suspicious circumstances and without warning, and the money was found in her possession. I don't see how you can break down such evidence."

"I'm sorry for the girl, but I can't let my feelings sway me in a matter of judicial duty. There may be palliating circumstances. Perhaps there are; and if these can be made clear the court and jury will, no doubt, give them due consideration and lighten the punishment."

"But, I tell you she is innocent!" stormed Fanshaw. "It's the most cruel outrage ever perpetrated in the Black Hills. If bills were found in her sachel, Jack Thornton put them there!"

"There is no use in arguing the question, now!" protested the magistrate. "The case is out of my hands now. I couldn't do anything if I wanted to."

"But you can release her on bail!"

"Certainly! If a proper bondsman is furnished."

"What is the amount?" Fanshaw asked eagerly. "Put it as low as you can, please!"

"Under the peculiar circumstances of the case, Mr. Fanshaw, I can't place the amount of the bond at less than five thousand dollars."

The young man was stunned. He had hoped it would be much lower. He doubted if he could secure a bondsman for so large a sum.

"If you will accept me, I will become her bondsman!" he said, boldly.

The magistrate looked at him with a curious smile.

"I am sorry to refuse you, Mr. Fanshaw. But, I'm morally certain you haven't property to that amount. And a bondsman ought to have property in more than double the amount of the bond."

Fanshaw was not greatly disappointed at the answer, for he had scarcely looked to be accepted.

He bowed himself out, and wended his way down-town. The remainder of the day he spent among the business men of Table Mountain, trying to interest them in behalf of Estelle.

The effort was a failure. Thornton's lying tongue had been busy, and no one would give the matter favorable consideration. It became quite evident, as he went from place to place, that the sentiment of the town was strongly against Estelle and in favor of Thornton. Many expressed regret and pity, but they would take no stand in behalf of the wronged girl.

"They are all a set of cowards!" Fanshaw exclaimed, bitterly. "They are under the lash of Jack Thornton, and fear to lift a finger. If we were once safely out of this town, I would never want to see it again. Such fair-weather friends are not worth having!"

A feeling of deep resentment against the people of Table Mountain took possession of him. He loathed and despised them for their cowardice with a feeling that was absolutely bitter. How he detested the place! Even the rocks and hills about it seemed hateful to his fancy.

Beneath it all throbbed the deep feeling of pain and sympathy for his loved and unfortunate sweetheart.

He knew, from the uniformity of sentiment expressed, that Estelle was already adjudged guilty. The trial would be a mere formality. And then she would be torn from him for years—perhaps forever! Reputation, hope, and all the sweet sympathies that go to make life pleasant or even endurable would be taken from her, and she would be immured with the most depraved and lowest of her sex. Even life itself would be lost, for he was sure she could not long endure the shock of imprisonment.

As he thought of all this he became frenzied and desperate. Calmer judgment was swept away, and he determined to release her or die in the attempt! They could but die! And if cruel fate decreed that they should be stricken down clasped in each other's arms, it would be infi-

nitely preferable to the life of torturing anguish and humiliation that awaited them!

The mad suggestion stirred his blood and fired his brain. It absorbed everything else. Reason, caution, and cool deliberation were choked out.

He did not want to remain in Table Mountain any longer; and, after the events of the day, he was certain that Estelle did not.

It was impossible to cope successfully with Jack Thornton. The Redcliffe Mine was irretrievably lost, and the prestige of the Redcliffe name had disappeared with the disappearance of the wealth.

As for the mine, he was not sure that he regretted its loss to Estelle. The manner in which it was seized was what had stirred him. Estelle seemed really dearer to him without the mine than with it. It dissolved the possible feeling that his motives in wooing her were mercenary. He loved her for herself alone, and, like the foolish lover that he was, rather felt that the possession of wealth placed her on a higher social plane.

Love made him strong, resolute and hopeful, and with her at his side he believed that he could successfully fight the battles of life without the aid of any fortuitous circumstances.

He decided to wait until a late hour before attempting the plan he had formulated.

As soon as darkness came he made the necessary preparations, then passed the intervening time in walking furiously and restlessly up and down the streets.

Shortly after midnight he approached the little jail. It was a rude and not very strong affair, and, as no one but Estelle was now confined within it, no very close watch was kept.

For a long time he stood in the dense shadows at its side, surveying it and listening. No sound came to him except the moaning of the wind. So still and quiet was everything, that he fancied at times he could hear his heart beat.

He became satisfied that the jailer was away—probably in one of the saloons down-town, drinking and playing cards.

This determined him upon a bold course. He advanced to the heavy wooden door, felt over it carefully, and sounded it with his knuckles. Then he chiseled an opening; and, inserting the saw he had brought, deliberately sawed out a section of the ponderous planking, sufficient to permit the passage of his body.

He worked with feverish energy, for he did not know how soon the jailer might return. He was well armed, and determined that if caught he would fight to the bitter end.

Throwing down his tools, he slipped through the opening, and stood in the silent corridor.

"Estelle!" he called. "Where are you?"

"Oh, is that you, John?" she asked, quivering.

Then added, with a start of fright:

"Oh, John, how did you get in here? And why did you come?"

"I came to save you, Estelle!" he cried, springing toward her, for she had not been locked in any particular cell.

In another instant she was sobbing in his arms, and he was covering her face with passionate kisses.

"Come!" he exclaimed. "We must get out of here before the jailer returns."

She drew back with alarm. In the joy and excitement of meeting, she had almost forgotten how he had entered.

"What do you mean, John, dear?" she asked.

"Why did you come here in this way?"

"To save you, Estelle. The people all think you guilty of that terrible crime. We must fly, Estelle! Go far from here. It is our only hope."

"No, John!" she asserted, firmly, struggling to release herself from his embrace. "I will not do that! It would be a confession of guilt. And I am innocent, before God, no matter what the people think."

"But you will be convicted, Estelle! Imprisoned! Perhaps for years! Think of that!"

"It would not alter my decision, John! The attempt at escape would be of itself a crime."

"Oh, John, I am so sorry you came here to-night! You must leave, dear, at once. If the jailer should return and find you in here, it would be terrible!"

"And then that broken door! How can it ever be explained, truthfully. Oh, John! why did you attempt so mad an act?"

John Fanshaw's heart was wrung with anguish.

"Do not upbraid me, Estelle!" he pleaded. "We haven't time for argument, now. The deed is done. I believe it is best for you to leave here. I have been around, mingling with

the people, and I know how hard and bitter they are. I attempted to get a bondsman for you, so that you might be relieved of the ignominy of this imprisonment, but in all Table Mountain there is not a man who will raise a hand in your behalf.

"That is what drove me here in the manner I came. Jack Thornton is all-powerful in the town; and a trial means certain conviction for you, my dear."

"I believe it would be best for us to fly from here! We can go where Thornton cannot follow. Time will relieve our act of criminal appearance, and Table Mountain will, some day, judge us aright. If it does not, we can live and be happy without it."

"No! no! no!" she pleaded. "You are mad, John! I know your intentions are good; but such a step would be a fatal mistake. I could never be happy an hour, if we fled in the way you urge. I am innocent. I will face my accusers, boldly. If all fails! But, it will not fail. Something tells me that the truth will be revealed."

"Now, dear, you must really go! Every moment adds to your danger. As for the broken door, it will have to explain for itself, I suppose."

She again attempted to extricate herself from his arms.

"Oh, how can I leave you in this fearful place?" he exclaimed.

"You must!" she whispered. "Hark! I believe some one is coming. Go! go! go!"

The sound of footsteps came from the little path leading toward town.

Fanshaw realized his extreme peril, and hastened to the broken door. He was too late!

The jailer had noticed the breach; and now stood in front of it, with cocked and ready revolver.

"Well, may I be darned! Looks like the gal's gone. She's sawed out er somebody's sawed a way fer her to git out."

He ended with a whistle of astonishment, then applied an eye to the aperture and peered into the jail.

He was evidently convinced that it was empty, or he would never have been guilty of so foolish an act.

As the head appeared in the opening, faintly revealed in the gloom, Fanshaw drew his revolver. His first impulse was to shoot the jailer, and make a dash for liberty.

His hand was stayed by Estelle.

"Better be taken, John, than to commit murder!"

The whispered words reached the quick ear of the jailer, and the head disappeared.

Then came a succession of shrill and vibrating blasts on a police whistle, that awoke the echoes along the dimly-lighted streets.

Fanshaw sunk back, gasping and dismayed.

"It's too late!" cried Estelle, wringing her hands. "You will be slain, now, if you attempt to escape."

She cowered and shook, as those palpitating calls continued to cut the air.

They were at once answered by a series of shouts, and a rapid pattering of feet.

Five minutes later the jail was surrounded.

If it had not been for Estelle, Fanshaw would have fought until slain. But her restraining hand was on his arm and her words in his ear.

"Surrender!" came the stern command.

And, without a blow, John Fanshaw surrendered to the jailer of Table Mountain.

CHAPTER VII.

SALLY THORNTON.

TONY ADAMS, the new bookkeeper of the Redcliffe Mine, was in quite a nervous state the next morning, although he strove to hide it. Six times he had counted up a certain long column of figures in the ledger, and then was not at all sure that he had the total right.

The news of the arrest of Estelle together with Fanshaw's attempted rescue and capture, was on every lip.

"A terrible affair! A terrible affair!" he kept saying to himself, over and over, as he struggled with the ledger. "I don't see what the fellow was thinking about! It gives a very black look to everything. Of course Estelle isn't guilty, but it will be hard to make anybody believe it, after that."

"No doubt I ought to have spoken to him, but I never dreamed that he would make so wild an attempt. If he had only kept quiet a few days Bildad and I would have unearthed something that would have opened the eyes of the town."

"This blocks and hinders things; but I don't see that we can do anything but go right on. It's a bad business all around. This affair will almost break Estelle's heart."

He began the seventh time on that tricky column of figures, when the door of the office was softly opened and Sally Thornton, as she was now called, entered.

She was radiant in silks and smiles and greeted him with a pretty little simper that was intended to be very effective.

The truth is that Sally had conceived a violent fancy for the young and handsome bookkeeper and never lost an opportunity of making herself agreeable to him.

She was not devoid of a certain kind of unintellectual beauty, and she knew it. And she used every artifice she could devise to increase her charms. Tony Adams was forced to acknowledge that, this morning, she was looking uncommonly handsome.

"Hard at work, already?" she cried. "You men make perfect slaves of yourselves. It's business, business, from morning till night."

"Necessity, Miss Thornton! That's what I'm here for!"

He tucked the pencil above his ear and wheeled the stool around until he sat facing her.

"I fancy your father would not care to pay me for playing!"

"No, perhaps not!" advancing to the railing and resting her gloved hands upon it. "But it must be dreadful to be perched up there all day."

"That's as we think about it, I fancy. I find it quite endurable."

"Better than being in jail no doubt!" with a malicious little laugh. "That John Fanshaw always was a fool. And he used to occupy that very stool, Mr. Adams! Think of it! Aren't you afraid?"

"Now, I know you wouldn't risk your liberty as Fanshaw did, for any woman?"

"Depends, no doubt, on who the woman might be!" he replied, with an attempted smile.

It occurred to him that he ought to cultivate the acquaintance of this gushing creature, for the general good of the cause in which he was engaged. Something important might come of it. In her talkative moods she might reveal secrets that would be invaluable.

"Well, I am rather sorry for Fanshaw! I can't say that I blame him; for in spite of your assertion, Miss Thornton, I believe I would take even greater risks for a woman I loved."

He gave her a meaning glance, that set her fickle heart to beating like a drum.

"You men are all alike!" she exclaimed, striking at him with her fan.

"No more so than women are. Now you wouldn't for a moment assert that you in the least resemble Estelle!"

She did not catch the hidden meaning with which the sentence was charged. Instead, she accepted it as a complimentary comparison.

"That pale-faced thing? She makes me think of a cat, as she goes creeping around."

A painful look came into the eyes of the bookkeeper, but she failed to notice it.

"Why, Mr. Adams, I should certainly feel hurt, to say the least, if you compared me with her, after what has happened."

"No comparison is possible, I assure you!" he answered. "You are as widely separated as the poles!"

"Oh, you flatterer!" striking at him again with her fan, and giggling.

"What does Mr. Thornton intend to do with the case?" he asked, dropping his bantering tone for a more serious one.

"Well, I don't know as I ought to say. But I heard pa telling ma that he had hired one of the best lawyers in the Hills to assist the prosecutor. Pa is terribly hurt the way Estelle has treated us. He said that he proposed to punish her bitterly for it. I suppose she will be sent to prison. I'm sorry for the little minx, in a way; and I believe pa is, too. He would release her, I think, if she would agree to leave Table Mountain and never come back."

"Did he say anything to that effect?"

"Now you are quizzing me, Mr. Adams; and if you go to quizzing me I won't answer a thing, for I shall think you're friendly to Estelle."

"Why should I be?" he queried.

"Oh, I don't know. You might have fallen in love with her, for all I can tell to the contrary."

He gave her a reproachful look that again set her heart to fluttering.

"No, I'm not in love with her. I'm not without curiosity, of course, and so I asked the question."

"All pa said about it was this: He said if he was certain Estelle would go away and never bother him again, he would be half-tempted to have the case dismissed. He don't like to push such a thing against a young lady and ruin her reputation."

"I don't see that conviction would make the stain much blacker than it is."

"No; but that's what he said. Now, I must be going, Mr. Adams. I am on my way up-town, you see; and here you've kept me talking for a half-hour."

"Call again!" he said, as she made a mock courtesy and retreated through the doorway. "Call often. You will always find me ready for a little talk with you, no matter how busy I am."

And as Sally Thornton continued her way up the street, she mentally assured herself that she had made a decided impression on the new book-keeper.

CHAPTER VIII. A MURDEROUS PLOT.

"I'm satisfied the fellow ain't here for any good!" mused Jack Thornton, as he stood near the stamp mill, one evening, buried in unpleasant cogitations. "I've caught him sneaking 'round two or three times, as if he was watching and spying on my movements."

Bildad Barnacle was the subject of his mental comment.

Bildad had readily obtained a situation under Thornton; and had now been in his employ for nearly a week. His immense strength, combined with his quaint simplicity and easy good-humor, had made him, from the first, a universal favorite; and Thornton had been congratulating himself on securing so strong and willing a laborer.

Lately, however, a spirit of suspicion had seized upon him, and the belief irresistibly grew in his mind that Bildad was not all that he appeared to be.

He had suspected the giant of dogging his footsteps of evenings. And on one occasion he felt sure that Bildad had overheard an important conversation which he had had with the prosecutor with regard to the cases against the prisoners.

He was almost afraid that Bildad was even now shadowing him.

As he ran hastily over the events of the past few days, and noted the little suspicious circumstances that cropped up here and there, doubt was displaced by absolute certainty.

"The fellow is a spy!" he muttered, uneasily. "There can't be any question about it."

The knowledge was well calculated to fill him with the deepest apprehension.

He had been rather unguarded in his movements and communications, and could not be at all certain that Bildad had not already obtained much damaging information.

The dishonest manner in which he held the Redcliffe Mine, and the fiendish nature of the plot he had entered into against Redcliffe's daughter, were matters that would not bear the light of investigation.

The first two or three days, Bildad had taken his meals at the Thornton residence. What might he not have overheard and discovered during that time? The suggestion was an alarming one.

"I see plainly I'll have to take some method of silencing him. How to do it, without bringing suspicion on myself, is the problem."

As he walked uneasily up the street, he glanced cautiously here and there, to make sure that Bildad was not following him.

He advanced only a short distance, until he came to a decision. It was a startling and deadly one, but it offered an easy way out of his troubles, and he resolved to put it into execution.

Turning at right angles, he threaded a series of dark alleys, and at last came to a tumble-down shanty, on the door of which he knocked.

It was opened by Silver Jim.

"Why, hello, Mr. Thornton! It's you, is it? Glad to see ye! Come in!"

"Not so loud!" cautioned Thornton. "I don't want the whole town to know that I'm here!"

"On the dead, eh? Well, come in! You kin talk as safe in hyer, as ef you was forty miles out into the hills."

Thornton promptly accepted the invitation to enter, for he was anxious to escape the notice of any chance passer.

"Doing anything in particular, now, Jim?" he asked, as he seated himself in the proffered chair.

"Wal, no! 'Less you call puttin' down red likker suthin' in purtic'lar. Been minin' an' prospectin' a little; but it's a slow go."

"Glad you're at liberty. Now we can talk business."

"How would you like to make five hundred dollars in less than one day's time?"

He sunk his voice to a low whisper as he put the question.

Silver Jim started so that he almost fell over backward, so great was his amazement.

"How'd I like it?" he gurgled. "Ho, ho! Wal, now, I 'low 'at 'most any man 'd like that. Try me onc't!"

"Do you think you could keep still about it, both before and afterward?"

"Still? Now you're a-shoutin'! I wouldn't whisper 'bout it, even in my sleep, ef them was the orders."

"Nor in your cups?"

"Try me onc't! Try me! Five hundred! Why, drat it, I'd 'gree not to talk at all fer less'n that!"

"That's what I wanted to hear!" continued Thornton, in the same low whisper.

"This is something that mustn't be breathed to any one; for, if you go into it, a revelation will hang both of us."

Hardened as he was, Silver Jim recoiled, with a gasp.

"Thunder! 'Tain't murder, is it?"

"Not exactly. At least, we won't call it that, though a jury might. We'll hunt up a softer name. But, if you're a bit squeamish, say so, and we'll drop the thing right here. No harm's been done so far."

"An' lose the five hundred? No; I calc'late I ain't a mite squeamish! Spit out what ye've got to say. I'll do it; ef the resk ain't too big."

"There's no risk about it. And the man I want handled is a chap you've got a big spite against. So that ought to be a further inducement."

"Who is it?"

"Bildad Barnacle!"

"Sho! Wal, now, I'm free to say I don't keer about tacklin' the feller. He's chain-lightnin' fer stren'th an' soopleness. Five hundred wouldn't do me much good, I'm thinkin', ef he laid me out."

"He'll have no chance to touch you," Thornton urged. "You'll not be required to go near him. He needn't even see you."

"Lay fer 'im in the dark?"

"Safer even than that; for there your revolver might hang fire, or you might miss him. In the plan I've outlined, there's absolutely no risk, and he can't escape you."

"Then I'm yer mutton!" Silver Jim exclaimed, emphatically. He would be glad of an opportunity to lay out the giant, if it could be done with perfect safety to himself.

His indignation flamed whenever he recalled how unceremoniously Bildad had handled him. But his resentment was held in check by a wholesome fear.

"You know the flume that brings the water from the top of Table Mountain to Redcliffe Mine? A portion of the way the flume has very little fall, and other places it pitches down quite rapidly."

"It's been leaking some of late, and I've been thinking of sending a man up to repair it. The men that have done that work heretofore have taken some rather unjustifiable risks. I've thought, but it enabled them to get along faster, and on that account no one has ever objected."

"Perhaps you know what I mean. There is a little, box-like boat, which they keep at the head of the flume, and by means of which they descend. By lying down in this little boat they can shoot from one level to another very quickly, and save lots of time."

"Bildad will naturally take that boat, as every one else has done before him."

"Now, what's to hinder some one from breaking the flume on one of those sharp descents, and at a place where the cliffs will hide the break until the boat is fairly upon it?"

"It's a thousand feet, nearly, to the bottom of some of those canyons, and if the boat should fall through into one of them, the man that is in it would never come out of there alive."

"And there would be absolutely no proof against the person that broke it. There need even be no suspicion, if a favorable place is selected."

"Suppose a spot is chosen where the flume winds around a cliff under a ledge of rock. There are two or three such places. Who is to say that a big stone did not tumble from the ledge and smash a hole in the flume?"

He looked at Silver Jim craftily, as if he would read the fellow's thoughts.

"It kin be done!" said the latter, after a few moments of thought. "It kin be worked like a top!"

"I thought so!" smilingly. "The question is, will you do it? For five hundred, remember."

"Ain't likely to fergit that part!" laughed Silver Jim. "Well, I calc'late not. Ho, ho!"

"You see it won't be murder, Jim!" softly and purringly. "That's an ugly word. You won't do anything but break the flume. You needn't even stay to see that the boat goes through. You can be back here in town or out in the hills, for that matter."

"Of course it wouldn't do to have a stone accidentally tumble through the flume too soon. The water would stop coming, you know, and the workmen at the mine might take a notion to investigate the cause. And, besides, our friend, the boatman, might learn of it and postpone his pleasure-trip. That's a point you will have to watch rather carefully."

"When's this hyer little trick to be looked after?" Silver Jim questioned.

"Well, say to-morrow morning some time. You can stroll out into the mountains, you know. It would be a good idea to take some tools and go prospecting. And the tools might come handy if the stone failed to do its work."

"I can send Bildad up with instructions what to do, and you can in that way determine when to make your assault on the flume. Wait till he gets started down. You can tell about when that will be by timing his movements. The sooner he gets there, of course the sooner he'll commence work."

"Then tip your bowlder and climb."

"I'll do it!" exclaimed Silver Jim. "Hanged ef I won't! Fer five hundred!"

"The money is yours the moment the work's done."

"An' ef I fail?"

"You can't fail, if you work the thing right. If you should fail, though, I'll see that you don't lose anything."

"Done!" cried Silver Jim, extending a very large and very dirty hand. "Fer five hundred. Shake! Hanged ef I won't—resk or no resk!"

Jack Thornton grasped the extended hand, and thus sealed the murderous and fiendish compact.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BROKEN FLUME.

THE next morning, in accordance with this arrangement, Thornton sent the unsuspecting Bildad up the mountain to search for and repair such leaks as existed.

"I don't think there are any of much consequence," said Thornton, in giving him his instructions. "But it's an old adage, you know, and a true one, that 'a stitch in time saves nine.'"

"You'd better go to the head of the flume and follow it down to the mill. And it will save time and trouble, I expect, if you use the boat, or 'traveler,' as the boys call it, in making the descent."

"Hang it all, I jes' hate to leave that air mill powerful, now; but, it's got to be done er lose my place, an' that wouldn't do at all!" mused the giant, as he moved off toward the mountain, loaded down with calking material. "Fer two or three days I've been thinkin' I was 'bout to git on the inside track o' this plaguey case. But, I hain't done it yit. An', mebbe, I'll lose the chance by hein' gone to-day. Wisht he'd 'a' sent some other man."

There was, apparently, no help for it, though. He must obey the reasonable orders of his employer or quit the mill.

It was almost three miles from the mill to the edge of the table-land, and a half-mile further to the reservoir. The length of the flume, however, was much greater, for it wound and twisted about in an eccentric way, to lessen the grade of the descent.

Table Mountain was only a mountain by courtesy. It was in reality a wide, almost level tract, extending like a shelf from the feet of the hills behind it. Near the outer edge of this tract there was a depression, forming a lake or pond of considerable magnitude. This pond acted as a natural reservoir for the storage of the water and melted snow of the steep back of it; and from it the water was conveyed in a winding flume to the Redcliffe Mine.

It was a toilsome and weary journey to the head of the flume. The intervening country was little more than a succession of rocky and broken canyons. Wherever possible the flume clung to the hillsides, but in a few cases it was compelled to make wide leaps over these can-

yons. At such points it was upheld by spidery trestle-work.

As Bildad made his grumbling way forward, he scanned the flume, wherever and whenever it became visible, but without discovering any of the reported leaks.

"If a feller c'u'd see the hull len'th o' the pesky thing, now, it'd save a heap o' trouble!" he growled. "Mebbe they ain't more'n one or two little leaks in it; and he could go right to them without stoppin' to examine along."

It was almost noon when he reached the reservoir.

Everything was all right at that end, and the little traveler-boat was bobbing quietly in its accustomed place.

This boat was something of a curiosity in its way, for it was intended to be run without oars or rudder.

The flume was narrow and the boat—a long, box-like concern—was built so that not over six or eight inches intervened on either side between its ribs and those of the flume. This rendered oars and rudder unnecessary. It could do nothing else but keep its head in the right direction and the current carried it forward, sometimes at a tremendous rate.

When advancing against the current, it had to be pulled up by ropes thrown over the bracing-cleats.

Bildad scanned the flume as far down as he could see; and, as no leaks were visible, got ready for the descent in the boat.

In one end he piled the material he had brought for use in calking. Then he climbed in, and stretched himself out in the bottom. This was rendered necessary by the bracing timbers or cross-cleats, under which the boat would have to travel.

As a general thing the progress of the boat could be stopped at any time by simply reaching up and grasping one of these cross-pieces. But this could not be done at points where the descent was rapid and the current correspondingly swift. All one could do at such places was to cling to the bottom of the boat and allow it to shoot like an arrow to the next level.

Having settled himself comfortably Bildad cast the boat loose and allowed the current to propel it forward. The water did not rush very swiftly there, and the novel, gliding motion of the strange craft was very pleasant.

Lying on his back he could see the narrow strip of blue sky above, with fleecy clouds tumbling lazily beneath it. The speeding braces flitted across his vision like a succession of black lines. The rubbing of the boat's sides, as they bumped and ground against the heavy planking of the flume, furnished a fitting lullaby to the rocking, cradle-like motion.

When the boat had traversed what he considered a proper distance, he stopped it by grasping a brace, and thus bringing it to a standstill.

He was at the beginning of the first swift descent, and at this point he could easily look down and across the next level.

This descent was made over a canyon, and the thought impressed him uncomfortably, as he looked at it, that the flume at that point would be a bad place to fall from.

There were still no leaks to demand attention, and he prepared for the arrowy descent.

The current again caught the boat as his hand left the brace, and bore it easily onward for a few yards. Then came what might be not inappropriately termed the rapids.

The burrying water became churned almost into foam and the boat thumped and pounded against the sides of the flume as if it would tear itself to pieces. Faster and faster sped the descending current. The braces above seemed to run together, like the spokes of a carriage-wheel, so swiftly did they pass by.

Then the boat floated out into the calmer waters of the level below.

"Bout a mile a minnit, that was," observed the giant, as he again stopped the motion of the boat by grasping a brace. "Don't 'low that I'd keer to travel any faster. Too much like flyin' fer me, that air. Blamed if I wouldn't ruther 'coon' the consarn, as we used to 'coon' fences back East, when the rivers was up. Guess I'll do it, too, if the boss ever sends me on another arrant like this."

As before, there were no leaks visible. The fact struck him as somewhat singular, but it did not make him at all suspicious.

"They must be fuder down," was his reflection, as he completed the survey. "If I'd 'a' knowed they wasn't none at this end o' the consarn I b'leeve I'd 'a' tried to git up to 'em from below. I could 'a' done it, I 'low, while I was trompin' my way up the mountain."

The fall, for a half-mile almost, was easy and pleasant from this point, and he rather enjoyed it. Then he came to another descent.

The flume here curved sharply around a spur, and he could not see more than two or three rods in advance.

This was the point that Silver Jim had selected for carrying out his murderous plans. The villain was even then perched on the side of the ledge above the flume, with a monster boulder in place, ready to send it crashing through the timbers.

He had climbed to a point where he could see Bildad throughout almost the entire length of his descent, while, at the same time, he was himself concealed by the boulders and patches of low-growing bushes.

He had been there for over an hour, crouching and waiting, with the deadly stone poised on the face of the ledge. He feared to launch it too soon, as the sound of the water falling into the depths of the canyon might serve as a warning and defeat his object.

Bildad hesitated some minutes before taking that last flying, plunging leap. He could not see what lay beyond the point of rocks, and it was too much like hurling oneself into space to suit him. Yet the water rolled onward, without any sign that a leak or break existed anywhere. He could hear it as it rushed and foamed and gurgled on its way to the next level.

Once he was on the point of permitting the boat to drift down empty, and following it by clinging to the braces. He would have done so, perhaps, if he had not feared that the boat would get into swift water again before he could overtake it. That would send it whirling down to the mill, and he would be laughed at for his cowardice in deserting it.

He had no relish for that. And the boat would certainly get away from him. No! he would descend in the usual way. Other men had so descended, hundreds of times, and he flattered himself with the belief that he was as brave as the bravest.

So he deliberately placed himself on his back in the bottom of the frail craft, let go of the restraining brace and took the final plunge.

At the same instant Silver Jim loosened the gigantic boulder. With a mad rush it rolled down the face of the ledge, rebounding and tearing its way through the bushy patches. Then it struck the flume with a mighty blow, tore it from the lacing trestle-work and carried it into the abyss.

Bildad heard that crashing roar and instantly divined its meaning. But he was in the grasp of the powerful current, and it seemed impossible that he could save himself.

He had no idea, however, that the destroying boulder had been sent on its deadly errand by human agency. His thought was that it had been loosened by natural forces. But he had no time to dwell on that. The terrors of his situation were enough to overwhelm and blot from his mind everything in the nature of conjecture.

The boat leaped and bounded like a living thing, for the speed of the current was at once more than doubled by that break. How it writhed and raced and twisted, and how the water foamed and hissed around and beneath it! It was horrible! And the speeding braces above were so blent and blurred that they scarcely interposed between Bildad and the blue sky. That sky that he felt he was never again to look upon!

Then, as the roar of the falling waters reached his ears, he roused himself with a mighty effort. It seemed almost useless to attempt anything, but he could not die like a rat in a trap.

He dared not lift his head above the edges of the boat. The swiftly passing braces would at once have sealed his fate. Neither could he hope to grasp and cling to them. His hands and arms would be beaten and broken in the effort.

He turned upon his side, keeping his body well shielded by the boat, and tore one of the thwarts from its fastenings. An idea had come to him that offered a faint ray of hope. He proposed to test it. If he failed, he would be no worse off than before. Death must come speedily, anyway. If he was killed in an endeavor to escape it would only usher him into eternity a few moments sooner than would the death that awaited him on the cruel, jagged rocks of the canyon.

Nearer and nearer came that appalling roar. Swifter and faster sped the doomed boat.

Bracing himself for the terrible shock that must inevitably follow, Bildad gave the thwart a quick thrust upward.

It passed between two of the braces, which were at this point set very closely together to add to the strength of the flume. Should the braces or the thwart break, or should the latter be wrenched from his hand, Bildad knew that hope must at once perish.

What happened when the thwart was caught he could never clearly remember. For one thing, a violent jerk followed, that almost pulled his arms from their sockets, muscular as he was. His body was thrown against the overlapping timbers with a force that bruised the flesh and almost fractured the bones; and his herculean shoulders were driven against the stern of the boat with a crash that deadened and numbed his entire body.

But he clung to the tough mountain-ash of the thwart with an energy born of despair. It bent like a bow and the stout braces snapped and cracked beneath the tremendous strain. The boat dipped until the water rushed into it, in flooding volumes; then it sunk and was swept from beneath him by the madly-rushing current.

In another instant it took that wild leap into space and was dashed into fragments on the rocks below.

Still Bildad clung there, giddy, numbed and faint, his mind almost deserting him in this fearful extremity.

Then with a mighty effort, such as no one but a man of giant strength could have put forth, he drew himself up out of the raging flood and took firm hold of the friendly braces with both hands.

For a moment he rested thus. Then, feeling a faintness and weakness stealing over him, he climbed slowly and painfully and with great difficulty out of the roaring torrent, and fell almost exhausted across the braces that had saved him.

Here he clung, while his strength slowly and feebly came back to him.

He had literally drawn himself from the jaws of death, by a muscular power truly herculean and a physical endurance that was almost sublime.

CHAPTER X.

BILDAD HOLDS HIS PEACE.

As Bildad lay there, pale, trembling and exhausted, feebly gripping the sheltering cross-timbers, he chanced to turn his half-blinded eyes toward the ledge, from which the boulder had come.

The sight he beheld galvanized him into renewed life, if it did not put additional strength into his body.

Silver Jim, seeing that his murderous purpose had failed, was stealing away through the brush and among the rocks, dodging nimbly here and there and making as much haste as possible.

Bildad at once recognized the towering form of the miscreant. He knew, then, that the fall of the boulder had not been accidental. Had he been able he would at once have pursued the villain to his death, for his indignation leaped into a fierce and deadly flame.

Silver Jim disappeared; and with him disappeared the sustaining excitement of the moment.

A groan burst from Bildad's lips.

"Oh, my God, this is terrible! It seems that every bone in my body is shattered and my flesh pounded to a jelly."

He dropped his dialect, in this supreme moment, and spoke like an educated man.

For more than ten minutes he remained in that position, hanging like a dead weight to the braces. Then, with much difficulty and great pain, he drew himself into a more erect posture.

As he did so he looked at the broken flume just beyond him, with the water tumbling madly over it, and then at the white, fang-like rocks far below. It was a sight to make his heart sick.

After resting a time in this position, he commenced to crawl slowly toward the level above. His limbs and arms were stiff and sore, and his muscles had a dead, lumpy, painful feeling. But he disregarded all this and continued the tortoise-like movement.

Every few yards he was forced to halt and rest.

His deliverance seemed like a dream, and he could scarcely convince himself sometimes that he was truly alive and comparatively safe.

Then as he recalled the character of his remarkable escape and the deadly peril that had menaced him, a prayer of sincere and heartfelt thankfulness ascended to that great and good Being, of whom it was said, that not even a sparrow shall fall to the earth without His notice.

That was a long, tedious and exhausting as-

cent. At other times Bildad could have climbed the distance in a very few minutes. Now, it took him nearly an hour.

When he came to the place where the flume touched *terra-firma*, he gave a great cry of joy. Tears even came to his eyes, strong man as he was, as he climbed from the flume and felt the solid earth once more beneath his feet.

It was a little past noon. For another hour he rested, and then began the descent toward Table Mountain. When he reached it the sun was sinking.

Jack Thornton was coming out of the stamp-mill just as Bildad reeled up the street.

Silver Jim, finding that his attempt had failed, had remained out in the hills, fearing to return with an unfavorable report, and Thornton was fully convinced that Bildad had been slain.

As soon as the break in the flume had been discovered at the mill, he had sent out a force of workmen to repair it. He was too nervous and excited to accompany them; and had been expecting every minute that they would return with Bildad's mangled and broken body.

His terror and consternation may easily be imagined, when Bildad staggered slowly toward him.

He could not repress a little cry of amazement and terror, his face became ashy pale and his hands shook. For a moment he was almost convinced that he was looking at Bildad's disembodied spirit. The idea that the man might escape from the trap which had been prepared for him had not entered into Thornton's calculations.

Bildad noticed the consternation and dismay of his employer. But he affected not to see it, and advanced with a sad and weary smile.

"Why—how—I mean—"

Thornton stammered and bit off the unfinished sentence with a gasp.

"Still a-kickin'?" said Bildad. "But it's a mighty feeble sort of a kick."

Thornton was regaining control of himself.

"Never was more surprised in my life!" he declared. "Allow me to congratulate you. I would have staked all I have that you were this minute lying dead somewhere between here and Table Mountain. That's what startled me so; and it's enough to startle anybody. It's like a man coming back out of his grave, you know!"

"When we knew that the flume had broken loose, I at once figured that you were doomed, for I knew you were somewhere on it in the boat. The down-pour of water I felt sure would drag your boat through the break."

"It did!" Bildad returned, simply. "It drug the boat through but I wouldn't go. I'd made up my mind that I wanted to live a little bit longer yet, you see!"

He knew from Thornton's agitation that he had planned the devilish work and had hired Silver Jim to carry it out. This showed, also, that Thornton had penetrated his disguise and was determined to put him out of the way.

But by neither word nor look did Bildad reveal the knowledge that came thus suddenly to him.

He also resolved that he would say nothing of seeing Silver Jim.

"Twas a close call, that's a fact! Closest I ever had; and I feel, now, as if I'd been run back'ards an' forrards all day through a cider-mill. If you never had sich a feelin' you can't imagine hardly what it's like!"

"Not very pleasant, I should judge, at any rate!" said Thornton, with an attempted smile. "But, tell me how you managed to get out alive! I'm dying to hear the story."

Thus adjured, Bildad told of his marvelous escape, suppressing such incidents as he wished to hold back, and saying nothing at all of Silver Jim.

"The recent rains must have loosened the boulder!" Thornton declared, determined to make this plausible theory the general and popular one. "It may, and doubtless has been, trembling in the balance for weeks, ready for the first stiff breeze or the settling of a few pebbles to start it on its work of destruction."

"I suppose the flume is utterly destroyed at that point! The wreck must be pretty bad, for the workmen have been out all the afternoon."

"Ain't nothin' left o' it!" averred Bildad.

"Not a splinter. An' the boat's gone, too. An' if them air braces hedn't been tougher'n iron-wood I'd a' been scattered around among the rest of the wreck."

"That is, indeed, a matter for congratulation!" asserted Thornton, with affected warmth. "The flume can be repaired by a proper outlay of time and money. The loss of a life would be irreparable."

Bildad's eyes twinkled in an odd way, as these

words fell from Thornton's lips. He was sure they did not come from the man's heart.

"Thankee, Mr. Thornton! Thankee! Now, if so be you're willin', I'll hobble up to my room and try to git a little rest. I'm that stiff an' sore an' tired I kin sca'ce move."

Thornton stepped out of the path, and Bildad wended his slow and painful way up the street. "The villain!" he grated. "He is only sorry I'm not dead. He's afraid of me; and with good reason, as he'll find out before many days!"

CHAPTER XI.

A MATTER OF IMPORTANCE.

WHILE Bildad Barnacle was battling for life in the flume, Tony Adams received a note that gave him an agreeable, if startling, surprise.

It was from John Fanshaw, requesting an interview on a matter of importance.

Tony immediately leaped to the conclusion that Fanshaw had learned of something that promised to have a favorable bearing on the case in which both were interested.

How Fanshaw knew that he was other than what he pretended to be was what puzzled and startled him. That he knew or suspected it was evidenced by the tone of the note.

Tony would have gone at once to the jail, if he could have found a reasonable excuse for so doing.

A body of men had been sent out to the broken flume, and he supposed Bildad was of the number. The giant was not in the mill, when he looked for him, and this was a very natural inference. He hoped Thornton would go, too, and thus leave the coast clear.

But the latter remained at the mill; and Tony was compelled to stay at his desk through the long hours of the afternoon.

Then came a rumor that Bildad was dead, having been killed by the fall of the flume. The report made Tony almost crazy with anxiety. But he was forced to simulate an easy and unperturbed manner while under the eyes of Thornton. He wanted to hurry to the break and verify the report or ascertain just what had happened. He feared to leave his post, however, without some proper excuse, because of the suspicion such an act would create.

What a relief it was when Bildad returned! What music there was in his heavy voice, as, that night, he told Tony the story of his narrow escape.

Then Tony laid Fanshaw's note before him, and asked his advice regarding it.

"Why go, o' course!" enjoined Bildad. "Suthin' out o' common may come of it. The boy must know suthin', or he wouldn't a' sent the letter."

Tony left the house and wended his way toward the jail, avoiding the principal thoroughfares and keeping well in the shadows. This last was not difficult, for it was a fairly dark night.

On advancing toward the lock-up he was halted by the guard, who was seated on a bench in front of the building, lazily smoking a pipe.

The jailer was a low-browed, surly fellow, with a most villainous cast of countenance. Tony had seen him several times and had been convinced that he was not a man it would do to handle roughly or try to browbeat.

"What d'ye want roun' hyer?" he growled, eying Tony sharply. "Ain't nobody 'lowed 'roun' hyer after night."

"I know it!" was the nonchalant reply. "Circumstances, though, are said to alter cases. A matter of importance brought me."

"Well, ye might as well take yerself off the way you come!"

"Perhaps you'll change your mind, when I make a little explanation?" advancing as he spoke. "I've a friend in there that I want to speak to, and if you'll permit it, I'll make it well worth your while."

He chinked a couple of half-eagles together in his hand.

The sound had a pleasant and soothing effect on the jailer.

"Who d'ye want to see, an' what's it about? I'll have to know 'fore I kin let you in. An' I'll have to s'arch ye, besides. Ef them pris'n's sh'u'd git out o' there through any fault o' mine, I'd git bounced, an' maybe wu'ss!"

"I sha'n't play any tricks on you!" Tony assured him. "I want to speak to the young man and young woman in there. It will only take a few minutes."

"If you're willing that I may, it will be worth ten dollars to you. But upon the condition that you do not speak of my visit to any one."

"Not likely to do that, when it's ag'in' orders to let anybody in!" laughed the jailer. "You're

the new bookkeeper at the Redcliffe Mine, ain't ye?"

"Yes! But keep your knowledge of this affair to yourself. Here's your ten dollars. Now you're at liberty to search me. You'll find nothing on my person in the way of a weapon or a tool. I'm dealing with you strictly on the square, I assure you!"

The jailer made a most minute search of Tony's clothing, and even compelled him to take off his shoes.

Then, as he found nothing, he swung the door open and 'lowed him to enter the jail.

"The man's in the fu'st cell, and the gal's in the one over, yender!" explained, as he drew the heavy door to after him, and they stood together in the dimly-lighted corridor. "I keep 'em seprated so they ain't talk 'n' hatch up devilment a wecn 'em."

He led the way to the first cell and unlocked it. Then closed and locked it, when Tony had entered.

"Whistle er call when you're through!" was his parting command.

For a little while Tony stood in the semigloom, blinking like a cat.

Then a voice came to him out of the darkness:

"Is that you, Mr. Adams?"

"Yes," was the reply, as Tony advanced toward the speaker.

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Fanshaw; for he it was. "I feared you would not get my note; and when you entered, now, I was not at all certain it was you."

Tony clasped the extended hand, inquired after his health, and asked about the matter mentioned in the letter.

Fanshaw was quivering with excitement, and Tony could see that his imprisonment, and the despair occasioned by it, was telling fearfully on his strength.

"I bribed the jailer to get the note to you!" Fanshaw explained.

"The jailer?"

Tony's voice showed his astonishment.

"And the fellow led me to think that he knew nothing, and was not in the least expecting me."

"He wanted another bribe, I suppose!"

"And got it! Well, I forgive the rascal. Perhaps the double bribe will make him feel more kindly toward us."

Fanshaw laughed, in a quiet manner.

"I didn't know whether you would be likely to take an interest in the case or not!" he continued, feeling his way cautiously before committing himself. "But it occurred to me, after thinking the matter over carefully, that you would. I suppose you know what I refer to?"

"To your imprisonment and the young lady's!"

"More!" said Fanshaw, lowering his voice. "To the Redcliffe Mine and it's real owner!"

"Who is?"

"Estelle Redcliffe?"

"Yes! Go on!"

"And I suspected that you were somewhat interested in the affair."

Tony started.

"That in fact you are trying to get at the truth of that matter, now. I watched you pretty closely, after you supplanted me, and by putting two and two together I reached that conclusion. Am I not right?"

"You are!" Tony admitted.

Then he told Fanshaw how he and Bildad were putting forth every effort to get at the facts in the case, for the purpose of ousting Jack Thornton and restoring the property to Estelle, together with the causes that were impelling them.

Fanshaw listened attentively and nodded his approval.

"It is the very line I was working. Cooped up in here, I can do nothing, and it occurred to me that you could take up the trail where I dropped it and follow it."

"There is a will, which if it can be found will reveal everything and utterly rout these pretenders. I never saw the will, so my evidence, in its absence, would go for nothing."

"But Richard Redcliffe told me that he had made such a will, giving all his property to Estelle, in the event of certain contingencies. It was made and witnessed only a few months since, while he was back East."

"When he mentioned the fact to me, less than two months ago, he was in the best of health and could have had no anticipation of an early death. So he did not reveal to me where he kept it or speak very extendedly of its contents."

"This is most important!" Tony exclaimed. "If that will can be found it will make clear

sailing for us. And that is desirable, for I tell you frankly that we have been making very unsatisfactory progress.

"Have you no idea of where the paper is? Where did Redcliffe keep his private and valuable papers?"

"In a little iron box in the office safe. But the will isn't there. I looked the papers over carefully."

"I continued the search, day after day, as long as I had access to the office and mill. But I could not find the will, though I looked everywhere, almost. Then came my discharge and I had to give up the search there."

"It was at my request that Estelle remained in the Thornton family. They occupy the Redcliffe mansion, you know, and I thought the will might be concealed somewhere in it."

"She also searched carefully, but without avail."

"It seems almost useless to attempt a search where you have so signally failed!" Tony observed. "But I will begin it, nevertheless, in the morning; and never cease until I find the will or become satisfied it cannot be found."

"I knew you would!" cried Fanshaw. "What a joy it would be if I could only get out of this hole and assist you! The imprisonment is almost killing me; and it's tenfold worse on Estelle."

"It is terrible!" Tony assented, feelingly. "It's a shame that no one, of all the men of Table Mountain, would become Estelle's bondsman."

"I could have arranged the matter, probably, but I dared not. If I had lifted a finger in the matter, or if Bildad had done so, it would have brought suspicion upon us at once and wholly ruined our plans."

"I can see that very clearly!" returned Fanshaw, with a sigh. "You could do nothing, under the circumstances."

"Of course I will not chide you!" said Tony. "But you did a very foolish thing when you attempted to release Estelle. You could have given us invaluable aid, probably, by retaining your liberty."

"It was the act of a madman!" groaned Fanshaw. "I see it now. I didn't think at the time, though, that you and your comrade might be friendly to her interest. I would have called on you, if such a thought had come to me. It was here in my cell, that I pieced together the bits of evidence that suggested the fact."

"It is to be regretted!" averred Tony, clasping the trembling hand reassuringly. "But I would try not to worry about it. No use to cry over spilt milk, you know. You acted up to your best light, and that's all any man can be expected to do."

"Rest satisfied of one thing: If mortal man can do anything to right the innocent and punish a great wrong, Bildad and I are the men."

Fanshaw returned the warm and friendly grasp, and in broken sentences tried to say how thankful he was that such friends were working for them.

"And now I must go," cried Tony, "or the jailer will come to see what is detaining me."

He whistled shrilly to signify that the interview was at an end.

In response the jailer entered the corridor and unlocked the cell-door.

"Through, eh?"

"Yes," replied Tony, slipping past him. "Now if you'll let me see the young lady for about a minute, I'll be ready to say good-by to you."

That interview between Tony Adams and Estelle Redcliffe does not need to be transcribed here.

Sufficient to say that when he left her there were tears of joy and happiness in her eyes, and her voice had a cheerier ring than it had held since the death of her beloved father.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SEARCH FOR THE WILL.

THE next morning Tony Adams began his search for the missing will. He had excellent facilities for prosecuting such a work, for he had access to the office safe, and all the papers of the Redcliffe Mine.

Fanshaw's confession of failure was discouraging, but he determined that it should not in the least abate the ardor of his search.

Jack Thornton absented himself that day, and Tony took advantage of this absence to overhaul everything in the safe.

It was stuffed with old papers and rubbish of various kinds. There were several bundles of letters to Redcliffe, by various parties, relating

to business affairs, and package after package of receipts and bills paid.

Through this mass Tony waded slowly and carefully, opening every envelope to see that the will was not tucked away in it, before returning it to its heap.

Thornton was not much of a man of business, and some of these packages he had doubtless never examined.

Tony felt that he must be working over the same ground that Fanshaw had delved in; but he kept saying to himself that Fanshaw might have missed an envelope, and it was likely to be the one above all others that he should have examined.

Several times during the day he was annoyed by the sudden entrance of Sally Thornton.

This young lady's fancy for the new bookkeeper had assumed a rather violent type. She would tip-toe into the office at all conceivable hours, slip up behind him and tap him on the cheek with glove or fan, and then burst into raptures of giggling and grimaces at his startled air.

He bore the annoyance with the utmost composure. He had an object to attain. And even if he had none he probably would have enjoyed this attention on all ordinary occasions. Young men are easily susceptible and there are few of them who do not like to be made much of by a handsome young woman, even if that young woman is occasionally silly.

But on this day her sudden intrusions were a source of real discomfort.

Whenever she came in he had to suspend his work, and he greatly feared she would suspect something from the appearance of the tumbled papers. If she should, and carried her suspicions to Jack Thornton, how could he gloss the matter over?

"I thought I would put the papers of the office in a little better shape," he explained, on one occasion, when he noticed her eying them. "I don't think they have been straightened up since your father took possession of the office, judging from the condition in which I find them. I know they haven't been touched since I came here, and, as I had a little extra time to-day, your father being away, you know, and not requiring my services in his correspondence, I concluded to arrange them in a more orderly and convenient way."

She had perched herself on the railing, and smiled down on him as he concluded, in a bewitching manner.

"Oh, don't make such long speeches about business!" she pouted. "Isn't that ribbon pretty?"

Tony breathed a sigh of relief. She hadn't been thinking about the tumbled papers. He noticed, now, that she had a bit of ribbon in her hand, and that was what she had been looking at, holding it out before her.

As she asked the question she twisted the ribbon about her head in a way that was really fascinating.

"It is, now," he cried, flatteringly. "Although I must say I hadn't noticed the ribbon before. I was examining the papers, you know, and never looked to see what you had in your hand."

"Fie, fie! Mr. Adams! That's just the way with a man. But I guess I'll have to forgive you, for pa says you're the best bookkeeper he ever had."

"I wonder if I'm not to be his last?" thought Tony. But he only said:

"If I can muster the courage I must thank him for the compliment. I hope it is deserved."

Sally removed the ribbon and formed it into a bow, which she pinned to one shoulder.

Then she fidgeted, twisted, and postured until she had drawn a half-dozen more complimentary expressions from him before she was ready to depart.

"Glad she's gone!" he muttered, as he again bent to his work.

But the day passed away without bringing to light the missing will.

That night he detailed an account of his doings to Bildad.

To do this he reported at Bildad's lodgings, for the giant was almost unable to leave his room that day.

"Couldn't find nuthin', eh?" the latter groaned, as he twisted about in a vain effort to place himself in an easier position in his chair. "Seems like we ain't makin' any headway! An' hyer I'm laid up, fer I don't know how long, with busted joints and sich. Don't b'lieve I was ever so sore an' stiff in all my born'd days as I am this blessed minnit!"

"Oh, you'll be all right in a day or two!" exclaimed Tony, cheerfully.

"Well, I hope so fer a fac'! An' now what you goin' to do next? I 'low the will can't be in the office! Sing'lar how some men 'll tuck sich things away, as if they calc'lated they was never to be got at!"

"I mean to continue the search. In fact I don't see what else I can do, until you get on your feet again."

"You mou't make a s'arch 'bout the mill!" Bildad suggested. "I reckon the thing's shet down fer a day er two. They've got all the men out on the flume, I onderstand."

"Yes, I can do that. They shut the water off at the reservoir and are now working on the flume with all the hands they can get."

The next day Tony followed out Bildad's suggestion. Jack Thornton had not returned; and he was thus enabled to spend considerable time in and about the mill.

But it resulted in nothing. The will had disappeared as mysteriously as if it had been sunk in the sea.

The succeeding day Thornton came back; and Tony confined himself rather closely to his desk.

Thornton did not mention the case of his absence, and Tony dared not venture a question or comment. He believed, though, that Thornton had been to Deadwood to consult some prominent attorney with a view to his employment to assist in the cases against the prisoners.

The day for the sitting of the territorial court was rapidly approaching; and Thornton, no doubt, was getting ready for it. If money could remove from his path these dangerous stumbling blocks he would not hesitate to use it lavishly, even as he had done in the fight for the Redcliffe estate.

Tony had lost much of the sanguine feeling with which he had commenced the search, but he continued it, nevertheless.

That success should come to him without effort and in a wholly unexpected way, he did not dream.

A week slipped by, and he was apparently no nearer the attainment of his object than when he began.

One morning as he proceeded to sweep out the little office—a thing he always did before the commencement of the day's work—the broom, pressing somewhat more heavily than usual against the carpet, lifted a corner of it.

The end of a large, yellow envelope was disclosed.

With a queer fluttering of the heart he drew it from its strange resting-place and tore it open.

It contained the missing will!

With what rapturous delight he made the discovery pen can scarcely tell.

He took the folded paper to the desk, spread it out flat and proceeded to read it over carefully.

It was the last will and testament of Richard Redcliffe, made about four months before his death—in an Eastern State.

It began by declaring that the testator was of sound mind and good bodily health. Then followed the devise, giving his entire estate to his beloved and only daughter, Estelle Redcliffe, provided his son, Frank Redcliffe, did not put in an appearance within five years—unless proof of his death should be sooner produced, when the property should at once become vested in Estelle. If, within the five years, this son returned, then the son and daughter were to share equally.

As Tony pored over this precious document, a light step sounded behind him, and he turned, to be greeted by Sally.

It was utterly impossible for him to hide his confusion. He started guiltily and endeavored to thrust the paper into its envelope.

Before he could do so, her eyes caught the words in large letters at the top of the page:

"LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF RICHARD REDCLIFFE!"

"What have you got there?" she asked, suspiciously.

"Nothing of any interest to you whatever!" he replied, endeavoring to conceal his agitation by a jocular and bantering manner.

"Yes; but I know you have!" she asserted, not to be put off in that way. "Let me see it."

CHAPTER XIII.

SALLY'S DISTRESS.

THERE was nothing to do but to brazen it out.

"No; I can't let you see it!" he cried, emphatically. "Perhaps it's a love letter from one of my old sweethearts! And you know I wouldn't dare to show you that."

"That will do for an excuse, Mr. Adams!"

But it doesn't satisfy me. Love letters are not often found in big, yellow envelopes. I saw the name of Richard Redcliffe on that."

She advanced a step as she spoke, and held out her hand.

"Let me see it, please."

"I really can't, Miss Thornton!" Tony declared, retreating before her. "There, don't ask me any more! It is a matter that concerns me personally and which I'm not at liberty to reveal. The name on it indicates nothing. There are plenty of old envelopes lying around with Redcliffe's name on them, and I make use of them frequently to stow papers away in."

"But the name was on the paper!" she persisted. "You must really let me see it, Mr. Adams, or I will never have any confidence in you again."

"You are acting very foolishly in this matter, Miss Thornton!" he exclaimed, a marked sternness in his voice. "I must absolutely decline to humor you in this whim!"

To his surprise she broke into a flood of tears and sunk, weeping and sobbing, into the nearest chair.

"Why, Miss Thornton, I can't really understand what moves you so in this matter?" his tones visibly softening. "If it was a thing proper to be explained to you I would do so readily, I assure you."

She made no reply, but arose and walked out of the office, her handkerchief to her eyes.

"Now, there's a pretty kettle of fish!" he declared, disgustedly. "I'm afraid she suspicioned what the paper contains. If so, she'll tell Jack Thornton and he'll proceed to call me to account. What had I better do about it? I'll never let him have the will, that's certain, unless he takes it from me by force."

"I knew it wouldn't do to tell her what I really have. No! That would be suicidal."

"When she took that step forward I thought she intended to snatch the paper from my hand. What would I have done if she had? By Jove, I don't know! I wouldn't want to fight a woman."

"And the way she wilted at the last 'paralyzed' me, as the boys say. Hang it, I never could stand it to see a woman cry. If anything gets away down around my heart-strings, that does. And Sally has acted like she thinks a good deal of me, too! That point-blank refusal must have hurt her."

Tony was annoyed and distressed, and greatly puzzled as to what course he ought now to pursue. Thornton was a man much his superior in size and strength, and if he should come to the office and demand the paper it was not likely that Tony could retain possession of it.

He did not like to leave the office and go in search of Bildad; yet, above all things else, he longed for Bildad's presence and advice at that moment. If he quit the office it would furnish positive proof that the paper was detrimental to Thornton's interest. At least such would be the construction Thornton would put on the act, should he come there to make inquiries and find Tony gone.

Tony had some hope that Sally had no definite idea of what were the contents of the envelope. His manner may have hurt her pride, and caused that painful break-down. She might not mention the matter at all to Jack Thornton.

The more he thought the greater became his confusion.

At last he determined to conceal the will; and remain where he was until noon. Then he would hunt up Bildad and place the precious paper in the latter's hands.

The carpet, that had so long and well kept its secret, was the hiding-place that suggested.

He looked up and down the street and over toward the stamp-mill, and even went out and circled the building before venturing to stow the paper away. No one was in sight; and he returned and tucked the will again securely under the carpet.

What were the feelings of Sally Thornton when she stumbled from the office, distressed and weeping?

She knew full well the character of the paper she had just been refused permission to see. She had read the title or indorsement of the will at the top of the first page, and knew enough of legal phraseology to comprehend its meaning.

Her duty to her mother, to Mr. Thornton, and to herself seemed plain. She ought, she believed, to reveal her knowledge without further delay. It might save grave complications.

And yet she could not bring herself, at once, to make the revelation. In her weak, willful and foolish way she loved Tony Adams. Perhaps she had exhibited that love in an unladylike and reprehensible manner. She had not been immodest; but she had been bold and for-

ward. And in the eyes of the world these qualities are closely related to immodesty.

Whatever her faults, and she had many, she had a tender spot in her woman's heart that had been deeply touched, and her love for Tony was as true and sincere an attachment as she was capable of forming.

She had no thought that he was allied with Mr. Thornton's avowed enemies. The fact that he had so important a document and was concealing the knowledge from Thornton, had such a suspicious look, though, that it quite staggered her.

His manner and confusion, too, when she came on him so suddenly, furnished additional condemnatory evidence. If he was friendly to Thornton, she argued that he would have at once placed the paper in the latter's hands, on finding it. And he could have had no reason for withholding its contents from her.

"Oh, what shall I do?" she moaned, on gaining the privacy of her chamber. "There is something dreadfully wrong about that, or Tony would not have acted as he did. He never treated me so before."

In her distress she rocked herself backward and forward and gave way to another outburst of grief.

"I heard pa say something about a will! Let me see, what was it? Oh, yes; Estelle claimed there was a will which, if it could be found, would give the property to her. Dear! dear! That would be awful! Just as we're getting fixed to live! I wonder if that can be the will Tony has?"

She went over in memory the scenes recently enacted in the office.

"If I had only thought, I could have got it away from him!" she cried. "If I'd walked in a little quieter I could have reached over his head and taken it from the desk before he knew I was there. But, pshaw! what's the use of thinking. I didn't; and that ends it. I hadn't any idea of trying to get anything away from him when I slipped in. I've slipped in that way dozens of times, and that's the first he ever tried to keep anything from me."

"Oh, how my head aches!"

She drooped her head on the little work-table, and for a long time sat there, thinking and staring at the pattern of the carpet.

At last her decision was taken. She would communicate her information to Jack Thornton let the result be what it might.

"If that will is what I think it is, and it ever gets into the hands of Estelle or any of her friends, it will ruin us! Tony will think hard of me, no doubt, but I must tell. Oh, dear, it would be just awful for us to lose this property. The thought, even, makes me shiver!"

Having come to this decision, she arose hastily and quitted the apartment.

Mr. Thornton had not come in yet, her mother said, as she inquired about him.

It lacked a few minutes of noon, and he would be home in a little while for dinner.

Sally did not wish to confide the weighty secret to her mother; and she determined to await Mr. Thornton's coming.

She was feverish, restless and uneasy, but she concealed this by walking briskly about the house and chatting in a light and gay strain.

When Thornton came in, she beckoned him to one side and told him of her discovery.

"What?" he cried, changing from red to white, and back again, by turns, "Redcliffe's will! Then we are ruined!"

"Oh, no, pa! I hope not!" Sally exclaimed, the tears again coming to her eyes. "Mr. Adams cannot refuse to let you see it, or even give it to you, as he found it no doubt, among your papers."

Thornton did not take so hopeful a view of the case.

"The scoundrell! The villain!" he cried. "I'll bet half I'm worth that he's in league with Estelle and that sneaking lover of hers. He's another Bildad, I'll warrant. I must hunt him up right away. I'll get that paper, or I'll choke the life out of him."

His loud words and violent manner drew Mrs. Thornton's attention, and she ran hastily in from the other room.

"What is it?" she asked, sorely puzzled; for Thornton was storming and Sally weeping.

He did not stop to explain matters; trusting to Sally to do that.

"I must get to the office before he leaves for dinner! The scoundrell! He'll talk when I get my hands on him."

He rushed madly from the house and hastened to the office.

When he reached it, it was deserted.

Tony was gone.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE STRUGGLE IN THE STAMP-MILL.

TONY'S anxiety to see Bildad was so great, that he left the office a few minutes before twelve. He had done that before, on one or two occasions, when business was not very brisk; and as it had brought no criticism then, he trusted it would not do so now.

To his great delight he saw Bildad sauntering slowly along the street, not far from the stamp-mill.

The giant had recovered from the bruises received in the flume; and had that morning announced his readiness to return to work.

The announcement had not been given a favorable reception by Thornton, who had no desire to have Bildad spying again upon his movements.

"Come into the mill!" commanded Tony, coming up behind him and tugging at his coat. "There's no one in there, and I'm bound to speak to you. I've found it!"

Bildad gave a start, and followed the young man into the stamp-mill without a word.

"I've found the will!" Tony declared exuberantly, holding up the yellow envelope. "And in the oddest place imaginable. You'd never guess where!"

"Shan't try, then!" said Bildad. "You kin tell me a heap easier."

"Under the office carpet."

"Sho!"

"It's a fact; and there's the document to prove it."

With this rather illogical statement, Tony slipped the paper from its envelope and placed it in Bildad's hands.

The giant slowly and carefully unfolded it, and scanned it with a critical eye.

"K'rect ye air! Thet's the very identikal thing we've been needin'. If that air don't jes' lif' Mr. Jack Thornton higher'n a kite, then my name ain't Bildad Barnacle."

"And to think that I've been walking over it every day. And Thornton's done the same. Seems funny, don't it?"

Tony's delight and enthusiasm were constantly at the bubbling point.

"Sing'lar! But, they's a heap o' queer things in this worl'! An' not the least on 'em is that a sensible man, as I s'pose Redcliffe was, sh'd tuck a important dockymment like that under an office cyarpet."

"If he hadn't, though, it would probably have fallen into wicked hands, you see, and we wouldn't have it, now."

"That's right. Yer philosophy's good, I reckon. Everything ginerally works out for the best, in the end."

"Now, the p'int is, what'd we better do? I'm in fer a bold move! Probate the will at onc't. Rest Jack Thornton fer ginerall cussidness and fraud'lent transactions; and take the young folks out o' jail on a writ o' *habeas corpus*. That's the ticket! We'll wake up the people o' Table Mountain afore another day's over!"

"Not if I know myself you won't! You may both put it down that you're at the end of your strings!"

The words came from Jack Thornton, and were uttered in a loud and threatening tone of voice.

He had come upon them unawares, with three men at his back, and now stood in the doorway, glaring at them with deadly hatred and rage.

Just back of him was revealed the powerful form of Silver Jim.

Thornton, finding that Tony had left the office, had immediately sent for Silver Jim and two other ruffians, whom he knew he could trust. It was his intention to hunt up the young man and force him to deliver over the paper.

The men had at once responded; and one of them, on his way to the office, had discovered Tony and Bildad in the stamp-mill.

"You might as well surrender!" continued Thornton. "We've got you covered; and we'll down you, if you attempt any resistance."

For answer Bildad hurled straight at the doorway a heavy iron bolt, with which he had been toying while talking to Tony.

The movement was so unexpected and the aim so true, that the men leaped backward to avoid the flying missile, not one of them all venturing to pull trigger.

The respite was but a brief one; for they were at the door again, almost immediately. But it enabled Bildad to grasp his own weapons, and stow the precious paper away in the pocket of his coat.

Tony also drew a revolver and stood on the defensive.

"Surrender!" screamed Thornton, leveling

his weapon, as if about to fire. "If you don't surrender you are dead men."

Silver Jim imitated his example and pointed his revolver full at Bildad's broad breast.

The rascal still held a grudge against Bildad and was rather pleased at what seemed an opportunity for paying it off.

"Wal, now, see hyer!" cried Bildad, loth to begin what he knew would be a deadly struggle. "What do you want o' us, anyhow? We ain't stole nobody's hosses."

"No; but you've stolen what is more valuable. You know what I mean. At least Adams does. I don't want any blood shed, and there will be none, if you're disposed to act right."

Thornton lowered his weapon slightly, as he made the statement, but Bildad showed no anxiety to take advantage of it. He was a reckless, daring fighter, when fighting became necessary and scorned deception and subterfuge.

"You have a certain paper that is of considerable importance to me. Yield it up, and you go free and unharmed. If you don't—I can tell you, now, you'll never leave this place alive."

"The paper don't belong to you!" Bildad insisted. "It's writ by Mr. Redcliffe an' belongs by rights to his dotter; an' she's the on'y livin' creeter I'll give it to."

"Down with 'em!" yelled Thornton, again leveling his weapon. "We'll have to wipe 'em out!"

Bildad pitched his revolver forward, at the same moment; as did the other combatants.

A succession of reports followed instantly.

Silver Jim gave a scream of pain and staggered backward, falling directly across the doorway.

"Boys, I'm done fer!" were the only words that came from his lips.

At the same time Tony Adams sunk down in a white and limp heap.

As the sulphurous smoke rolled away, and Bildad saw the young man, lying, apparently dead, at his feet, it aroused all the passionate and savage energy of his nature.

Thornton and his two remaining men were rushing toward Bildad through the white powder cloud.

Bildad could have cut them down with his weapon, doubtless. Instead, he hurled one full at Thornton's head; and then closed with the other men.

The struggle that followed almost baffles description.

The revolver butt struck Thornton fairly between the eyes and he dropped like a bullock in the shambles. Then Bildad met the others, with a rush that was simply overwhelming.

Grasping the nearest by the throat, he hurled him to the ground and planted a heavy foot on him. Raising the other aloft, as a large man would lift a stripling, he threw him through the doorway with a shock that deprived the rascal of all consciousness.

Thornton was gasping and struggling, by this time; but Bildad did not stop to give him a moment's notice. He hurried to Tony, lifted him tenderly in his arms, and leaped through the doorway; passing, in the act, over the lifeless form of Silver Jim.

It had been a wonderful fight—such a fight as only a man of immense daring and herculean strength could have made. And it had lasted scarcely longer than it takes to write the account of it.

"If they have killed you, my boy, God's vengeance on 'em!" he muttered, as he strode rapidly toward the nearest alley.

He had not examined the nature of Tony's wound. He had had no time to do so. He knew, though, that the young man was alive, for he could feel his heart-beats, and his feeble breathing.

He was anxious to reach his own room, or some place of privacy and security, where he could make the examination with care, and apply restoratives and bandages.

He knew that the streets would be swarming with excited men in a few minutes; and he feared to halt in the open. The way might be blocked up so that he could not proceed.

On gaining the alley, he hastened up it as rapidly as possible. A deep groan came from Tony's lips; and, when Bildad came near to the point where the alley opened out into a street running parallel with the first he halted, dangerous as the act seemed.

He was not sure that Tony was not losing a great deal of blood, and he feared the result of the inevitable weakening.

Kneeling by the young man's side, he quickly

loosened the coat, and stripped the shirt away from his shoulders and breast. To his joy he discovered that the wound was by no means a serious one. The heavy bullet from Thornton's revolver had torn through the flesh of the left arm near the shoulder. The shock alone had deprived the young man of consciousness.

The wound was bleeding rather freely, and Bildad tore the shirt into strips for bandages. When the flow of blood was checked, he slung the arm in a handkerchief.

Before this was accomplished, however, Tony came out of his death-like swoon, and looked up with a smile.

"Plugged me, did they?" he asked, faintly.

"Yes, they did. But you'll be all right in a little while. Now, do you think you can walk? Or shall I carry you again?"

"Oh, I can get along all right," Tony replied, with a great attempt at cheerfulness. "I'm not hurt bad. 'It's the first time I ever felt the lead though, and I must confess it rather takes the life out of one."

"Yes, I calc'late that it do, powerful," the giant observed, resuming his dialect, which he was apt to discard occasionally, in moments of great excitement. "Been hit onc't er twic't myself!"

Tony got on his feet, and, with Bildad's aid, found he could get along very comfortably, notwithstanding his weakness, and the pain of his wound.

"Oh, you'll be all right to-morrer!" cried the giant, cheerfully, "which is more'n some o' 'em back yander will be, I'm thinkin'. One o' 'em's dead, and t'others 'll be so sore they'll be likely to wisht they was, too!"

"Who's dead?" Tony questioned, a pained look in his eyes.

"That air Silver Jim. I didn't want to plug the chap at all. I don't never hanker after shootin', I don't, but it was him er me, an' self-defense is the fust great law of natur'. He had a dead bead on me, and would 'a' dropped me shore, if I hadn't been jes' a leetle the quickest wi' the trigger. I didn't have time to pick an' choose, er I'd on'y 'a' winged him. As it was I had to let drive at his broadest part, and that was his breast. I'm sorry, if the feller did try to kill me t'other day!"

They had gained the street; and now hurried along as rapidly as Tony could travel, heading for Bildad's room.

As they turned a corner, a startling sight met their gaze.

Thornton, at the head of half a hundred excited men, was running up the street in that direction.

A series of howls came from the advancing mob, when they caught sight of the detectives.

"There they are!" cried Thornton, leaping up and down with fiendish excitement. "There they are! Down with 'em! Don't let the villains escape you!"

CHAPTER XV.

A MADDENED MOB.

ON the impulse of the moment, Bildad caught up the young man, and bounded away toward his lodgings.

"There they go!" shouted Thornton. "Shoot them. Take 'em dead or alive!"

The cries of the mob increased to an angry roar.

At the same time men streamed from the buildings in front of Bildad, and withdrawn revolvers ranged themselves across the pathway.

"No use to run!" he panted. "One er t'other of us 'll be killed. I'll have to git to kiver, somewhere."

There was an unoccupied shanty close at hand, and into this he darted, closing and bolting the door behind him.

The chase and retreat had occurred so suddenly and occupied so small a space of time, that Tony, when once more he stood upright, was quite bewildered. He had not resisted, when Bildad seized him, for he had, usually, unbounded faith in the wisdom of any course pursued by that individual.

Now, however, as he contemplated their condition and realized their position, he began to doubt.

The shanty was only a slight board affair, that could neither resist an attack nor turn bullets. It offered so insecure a shelter, in fact, that it seemed impossible they could hold their foes at bay, behind its walls.

Bildad must have read his thoughts; for he said, as he squinted through the one little window, at the approaching mob:

"Don't know but we'd 'a' better stood our

groun' in the street. We'd 'a' had more fightin' room; an' they couldn't 'a' cooped us up so easy. There's murder in them fellers, and Thornton's a-aggin' 'em on all he knows how."

"We might have reached your room!" observed Tony. "I believe we could, if you hadn't tried to carry me!"

"No," with a negative shake of the head. "We couldn't 'a' done that, an' it wouldn't 'a' been of much use if we had. We kin hold this place as easy as that. I'm afeard we can't hold it at all, though."

"It'd been the bes' plan, likely, if we'd 'a' faced Thornton down afore the crowd. They must be honest men among 'em, though it don't look like it now. Our runnin' away will be apt to make 'em b'lieve 'most any yarn he's a mind to hatch out."

"Well, here they come!" shouted Tony, in great excitement. "It won't take long to tell whether we can hold the place or not."

A great yell came from the mob as they charged up the street toward the shanty.

"Git out yer shooter!" cried Bildad, as he drew the one revolver he had left.

Tony obeyed, in the excitement almost forgetting his wounded arm.

"Drag 'em out of there!" commanded Thornton, advancing furiously. "Tear the house down over their heads!"

"If ye 'tempt it!" shouted Bildad, raising his voice so that it could be heard above the tumult, "we'll open out on ye wi' our guns, and there'll be some dead men out there! An' about the fust one to drap 'll be Jack Thornton. We ain't done nothin' to be chased an' barried fer!"

The threat perceptibly cooled the ardor of those in advance. Even Jack Thornton, raging and desperate as he was, drew back involuntarily.

"I mean it!" continued Bildad. "We'll shoot the fust critter that comes for'ard. Put that in yer pipes while ye think it over."

At this a man pushed his way through the crowd as if he had something to say. He was one of the prominent citizens of the town, and Bildad readily recognized him.

"Let us not be rash, friends!" he cried, facing the growling mob. "Let's have some sort of an understanding. If we can, perhaps our friends over there may surrender without a fight. I'm free to say that I don't know just what they're charged with."

"Hain't done nothin', we ain't," exclaimed Bildad. "A lot o' fellers jumped onto us, an' we laid 'em out, same's any other men 'u'd have done."

"And what did they jump onto you for?" demanded Thornton. "You were trying to fire the stamp-mill, and we caught you at it. If we had been five minutes later the building would now be in flames, and that end of the town threatened."

A mad roar burst from the mob as this bold and serious charge was made.

"Down with the fire-bugs!" was shouted by some one, and the mass of men began to move forward again.

"It's a lie!" roared Bildad, knowing that so dastardly a charge must be instantly met. "They ain't a word o' truth in it, gen'lmen—not a word!"

The man who had undertaken the part of peacemaker shouted something, intended no doubt to be conciliatory, but the angry men gave him no heed.

"Down with them!" shouted Thornton. "Give 'em a taste of the same medicine. Remember that they'd 'a' cooked you in your houses, if they could. Fire the shanty and drive 'em out."

Thornton, as he uttered this inflammatory speech and noted that it was having its desired effect, took good care to slip back and mingle with the onrushing crowd. He feared to expose himself in that front line, knowing how true and deadly was Bildad's aim.

A shot from Bildad's revolver, through the window, severely wounded one of the foremost and threw the front into confusion. They halted and huddled together, and seemed on the point of breaking.

Then, as if moved by a common impulse, they opened fire on the shanty with their revolvers.

"Down! Throw yerself on the floor!" commanded Bildad, who had been narrowly watching them and saw the movement in time.

The splinters flew in a shower as the bullets tore through the soft planking. But they were all aimed high.

"We'll have to get out of here!" exclaimed Tony. "If we don't, we'll be killed. We can't hold the house, and there's no use of talking about it."

"Come! I'm going! Follow me! If we can

reach one of the alleys, we can get away from them."

He leaped to his feet, and before Bildad could say a word or lift a hand to prevent, threw the door open and dashed out.

A rain of balls and a chorus of yells greeted his appearance. But he got out unscathed. Then he darted around the corner, and placing the building between himself and the mob, started at a headlong pace for the nearest alley.

The mob screamed and howled and rushed in quick pursuit, passing by the shanty without paying any attention to the man still within it. The game afoot was the most attractive. At least it appeared so, although a mob is a creature of such sudden and contradictory impulses, so foolish and incoherent, that it may have forgotten Bildad's presence for the time being.

Tony ran like a deer, notwithstanding his wounded and still bleeding arm, and for a little while it seemed he would escape. But only for a little while.

An unexpected quantity appeared in the calculation. A body of men came racing into view from another street. Their position enabled them to head off the fugitive and prevent him from reaching the alley.

Seeing this, Tony wheeled about and darted toward another alley, further away. But the time lost was fatal. It was impossible that he could reach it. The mob closed in from that side, and he was again forced to change his line of flight.

Thus he was in a little while running in a series of contracting circles that brought capture nearer and nearer.

He was exhausted also, and labored on heavily and painfully. His exertions had loosened the bandages and his wound began to flow afresh; and movement became almost torture.

At last he stumbled and fell; and with a wild shout the pursuers pounced upon him.

Bildad had been anxiously watching the result of the chase, and when he saw Tony fall he gave a deep groan.

He had not attempted flight himself. He was convinced of its uselessness, and would have restrained Tony if he could. The young man had acted so quickly that Bildad was given no time for a remonstrance.

Tony, when he fell, gave up hope. He believed he would be instantly shot or torn limb from limb. And there was a glare in the eyes of the men surrounding him that gave credit to the belief.

"Shoot him!" cried Thornton, leveling his revolver at the shrinking young man.

It was wrenched from his hand.

"Stow that!" shouted an angry voice. "Shootin's too good for a fire-bug!"

A rope whistled through the hands of the miscreant, as he spoke, and the noose fell over Tony's neck.

Then the young man was jerked to his feet and a wild surge was given to the rope. The noose tightened, and soon Tony felt that he was strangling and choking to death.

He clawed frantically at the rope and rushed blindly forward after the crowd—or rather with it—to ease the strain upon his throat.

The mob was wild with unreasoning rage. It seemed in fact a band of maniacs or irresponsible fiends. There was no one who had sufficient power or presence to awe it or guide it in any way. Like a cowed animal, it was learning its strength and was simply uncontrollable.

This was the spectacle presented to Bildad, and he could see it quite plainly, for the mob was retracing its way toward the shanty.

"My God!" he exclaimed, his entire body quivering with excitement. "They intend to drag the boy to death!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A ROUSED LION.

WITH a roar like that from an enraged lion, Bildad bounded into the street, revolver in hand.

He stopped long enough to pick up a heavy club, then rushed upon the mob.

There was something inspiring grand in the way in which he scorned the dangers that beset him. His tall, powerful form was drawn to its fullest height, his shoulders were thrown back, and his quivering nostrils expanded like those of a charging war-horse. In addition, his hat had fallen from his head, and his long hair, floating over his shoulders, made him seem a veritable Samson.

"Give way, there!" the Hercules yelled, dashing the nearest to the ground, and literally mowing a swath through the ranks that were

thickest. "Give way, there! The man that harms that boy dies!"

The charge was so sudden, so unexpected, so daring and reckless that the wild mob fell back, awed. The very air almost became impregnated with fear of this storming giant.

"Give way, there! Back! Back!" and the heavy club swung to right and left, wherever an opposing form was revealed. "He who harms that boy dies!"

Again he had dropped his dialect; and those who were not fleeing or dodging his blows stood agape with astonishment.

They had seen and known Bildad as a heavy, awkward, uncouth and apparently ignorant man. The change was more than marvelous! It seemed miraculous! This maddened, charging Hercules was surely not the quiet giant who had gone so simply and unassumingly about his work! As well expect a plodding English peasant to develop into a lightning-defying Ajax!

With one final sweep of the heavy club, he reached Tony's side, stooped for a moment and removed the choking rope, then turned like a lion at bay. Shifting the club into his left hand, he leveled his revolvers at those nearest.

"Jack Thornton, you cowardly villain, I dare you to come up here and face me like a man! You whelp! I'll crowd that black lie down your throat, if I have to choke your vile life out in doing it!"

There was a stir, and it appeared that the mob was again on the point of moving against him. For a moment the rabble had forgotten what impulse had drawn them together, so awed were they by Bildad's wonderful strength and boldness.

Thornton recovered his courage at the same time and shouted again, but in a feebler voice than before:

"Down with them!"

Bildad paid no more heed to the murmurings of the mob than he would have paid to the lullaby of the ocean.

He fixed his burning gaze on the face of Jack Thornton in a way that made the wretch shrink and cower.

Then, turning to the angry men before him, he exclaimed:

"In the name of the law I demand that you arrest that man! Jack Thornton is a scoundrel of the deepest dye and to-day has become would-be-murderer!"

As he said this he threw open the breast of his heavy coat and revealed the badge of the Secret Service!

"He has almost led you to the commission of an atrocious crime this day, and I demand his instant arrest. I am here on special detective service and he is the man I have been trailing!"

Thornton turned pale, but made a bold denial and counter-charge. Excitement leaped to fever heat, cries and calls, shouts and exclamatory sentences swelled and echoed like a volley of musketry.

Bildad drew from his pocket the will and waved it above his head like a fluttering battle-flag.

"Here is the document that proves my assertions. It is the will of Richard Redcliffe, found to-day, by this young man beneath the carpets of Thornton's office. On the strength of this will I charge Thornton with being a perjurer and thief, and with wrongfully retaining possession of property that belongs to another. And I can prove it all, and more too—that he is leagued with assassins.

"That is why he attacked us to-day in the stamp-mill. It was to get possession of that piece of paper—a document that will tear from his grasp the Redcliffe property and give it to its rightful owner, Estelle Redcliffe, now imprisoned for a crime she never committed—a crime that he, the detestable villain concocted."

"It's a lie!" shouted Thornton, his face white with baffled rage and passion. "It's a lie! A villainous lie!"

"Come up here, you human hyena, and look into the eyes of the crowd while you say that!" retorted Bildad. "It's the truth and you know it, you diabolical wretch!"

"Yes, gentlemen! To gain possession of that paper he tried to slay us up in the stamp-mill. He failed! Then, by wholesale lying, he induced you to think we had tried to burn the structure. The falsity of that can be readily shown. If we tried to burn it there will be some sign or remnant of fire there, yet, for it was only a short time ago. Not more than an hour! If any fire or ashes can be found there it may serve to prove his story. There is none there!"

A few men on the outskirts of the mob darted away to verify the assertion for themselves.

The crowd had been constantly augmenting from the very beginning, and now almost the entire population of the town was gathered in the street and in the houses adjacent. Such an outpouring of the people Table Mountain had never witnessed.

As Bildad talked, his ringing, defiant, truthful words brought conviction to many a heart that had been stirred only a few minutes before by the wild and unreasoning mob impulse. They began to realize that there were probably two sides to the story and that the men might not be quite so black as Thornton had painted them. That in fact Thornton might himself be the blackest.

A mob is as liable, sometimes, to rend its leaders as it is to rend those against whom its fury was first directed, and from the mutterings that began to rise it seemed that this mob was fully as changeable as any.

Bildad saw that he was gaining, and he continued to lay on the lash.

"The people of Table Mountain have been hoodwinked and blinded by this utterly unscrupulous scoundrel in a manner that is simply astonishing. He has gained your confidence only to advance his own vile ends. He has used you as the cat's-paw to pull his chestnuts out of the fire. He has urged you on, and when the crash came has stepped back and given you the post of danger! Did you not notice that, this very day?"

"I came here to strip this mask of hypocrisy from him—to reveal him to you in his true light—to protect you from his monstrous impostures; and, when crowded to the wall, he proudly fancies he can still make use of you to crush me, and to further rob Estelle. Will the people of Table Mountain be longer deceived by him? Will they longer allow him to over-ride their better judgments, and lead them around with rings in their noses as men lead unthinking oxen?"

"By a species of sublime impudence and brazen effrontery, such as was perhaps never equaled, and by systematic bribery and perjury, he obtained possession of the Redcliffe Mine, and had the real heir to the property imprisoned. He claimed there was no will. Gentlemen, here it is; and it shows that Estelle Redcliffe is Richard Redcliffe's *only* daughter! What, then, may I ask, becomes of the claims of these pretenders and adventurers, for both the women in his house are in with him in this wicked game."

Tony Adams had, some time before, struggled to his feet, and now stood watching the giant, as he hurled these statements at the mob as if they were red-hot balls from a siege-gun.

Evidently Tony was still bewildered and could scarcely comprehend the turn of affairs. It was almost too incredible for belief. A few minutes before, doomed, apparently, to a terrible death; now standing unhurt, amid what had been a raging mob. It seemed like taming the jungle tiger by some mesmeric spell.

His wound pained him and the blood slowly oozed through the sodden shirt. His head ached. His throat throbbed, where it had been cut by the cruel rope. His limbs trembled under him from weakness. Yet he knew nothing of these things. He was fascinated and held spell-bound by the wonderful magnetism and sublime darning of Bildad Barnacle.

The mob melted and became as wax under the flood of Bildad's burning words. He swayed, and held, and controlled them as a great orator sways and moves an audience. No doubt they would have wept if he had so desired.

And still the flood of words poured on.

Suddenly Bildad stopped. His keen eye had been searching vainly for Thornton amid that sea of faces. He was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is the man of whom these things have been said?" he asked, drawing himself aloft. "Does he dare face me and deny them? Or has he fled, like a stricken wolf that he is? Where is he?"

An expectant hush fell on the crowd. Every man looked at his neighbor, as if he expected him to answer or point out Thornton.

Then the crowd began to surge, and call, and question. A hum of voices succeeded the torrent that had fallen from Bildad's lips. The confusion became greater and greater. The questions flew thicker and faster, and the mob moved and writhed like a living tide.

"Where is he?" again called Bildad, lifting his voice till it rung through the street like the blast of a trumpet.

For an instant the crowd became deathly still. Then came the reply, like a roar of baffled rage:

"The villain's gone!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A HASTY FLIGHT.

"WHAT is the trouble?" demanded Mrs. Thornton of her daughter, as Thornton left the house, and raced toward the office.

She became wild with rage, as Sally told the story.

"The sneaking puppy!" she exclaimed. "To think that we've been harboring such a wretch!"

Sally attempted to raise her voice in a feeble defense of Tony.

"I won't hear a word of it!" stormed Mrs. Thornton. "You have been making a fool of yourself over that fellow; and he's been using you as a tool, likely, to obtain some damaging information against us. I hope you've not given him any confidences."

"I haven't!" snapped Sally.

She was hurt by the imputation, and by the thought that that might have been Tony's motive. It was a deadly stab at her self-pride.

"If Mr. Thornton finds him in the office, I hope he'll wring his neck!" continued Mrs. Thornton, whose wrath seemed uncontrollable.

And thus she continued, fuming and fretting, until the ominous cracking of pistols came from the stamp-mill.

At this she gave a little scream.

"Oh, what can have happened?" she exclaimed, wringing her hands and hurrying to the door. "Perhaps Mr. Thornton is killed! Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

She ran down the path, bare-headed, and without a thought of her personal appearance—a thing she would not have done for worlds, on any ordinary occasion.

Sally followed at break-neck speed and came up with her just as she gained the street.

At that moment Bildad issued from the doorway of the stamp-mill, with his heavy burden, and hastened away.

Mrs. Thornton could discern the form of a man lying across the threshold, and believed that her worst fears were realized.

"Oh, they have killed him!" she cried, pantingly, hurrying on toward the mill at her best gait.

Sally outran her and was the first to reach the prostrate form.

"It's Silver Jim!" she cried, relieved and yet horror-stricken. "And he's dead."

Glancing within she saw Jack Thornton struggling to his feet. He was rather weak and wild-eyed—for the revolver-butt had struck hard—but he was otherwise uninjured.

Mrs. Thornton gained the doorway as he approached.

"What's the matter?" she asked, wringing her hands in a distracted way.

"Everything's the matter!" he snarled. "Bildad and Tony have got the will and have escaped with it. We're ruined! We tried to down 'em in here, but they laid out Silver Jim as cold as a wedge and came near settling the rest of us."

Mrs. Thornton became frantic.

"Oh can't something be done to get the paper away from them before they can make use of it? Something *must* be done!"

The men whom Bildad had so unceremoniously disposed of were returning to consciousness. They were pretty well shaken up, but when they got on their feet, a few moments later, they were as capable of evil as ever.

Thornton had been thinking; and he now turned to these men.

"See here!" he said. "Those fellows mustn't escape us. It will be five hundred dollars in each of your pockets, if they are caught or killed within the next half-hour. If we work it right they can't get away. Rouse the town; and spread the report that the were trying to burn the mill."

The rascals caught the cue, and started up the street, gesticulating and yelling vociferously.

Thornton followed them; and, in a very little while, the three succeeded in organizing the ferocious mob that was to beset and endanger the lives of Bildad and Tony.

Mrs. Thornton was so excited and agitated that she followed the mob and hung upon its outskirts during the time of its greatest delirium. She recognized the turning point of the tide, however, sooner than Thornton did.

"Everything is lost!" she moaned, as she ran back toward the house. "Everything! Everything! Oh, dear! Oh, dear! What shall I do?"

Sally was sitting by the window, sobbing, when Mrs. Thornton reached home.

She knew by her mother's manner that affairs were going against them.

"Oh, my dear, we're ruined!" shrieked Mrs.

Thornton. "The mob is turning against your pa! I wouldn't be surprised if they do something terrible. We must leave here. They may tear the house down over our heads, or burn it. Oh, dear! This is dreadful!"

As she talked she began to change her clothing for heavier and more valuable garments. She tumbled the contents of her trunk upon the floor; and sitting by the heap began to select the articles she wanted, at the same time sobbing and moaning and ejaculating:

"Don't sit there staring as if your eyes were going to pop out of your head!" she exclaimed to Sally. "Get your clothing and jewelry. We must leave here just as soon as we can. I tell you everything is lost!"

Her mother's manner made Sally almost hysterical. But she hurried away to obey.

"Oh, my! Oh, my! this is awful!" moaned Mrs. Thornton, as she formed the selected articles into a parcel and fastened them with a shawl-strap, clasp in at the same time a torrent of tears. "Just as we were beginning to live! Just as we were beginning to live!"

That was the one thought that was crushing her. Not sorrow for the wrongs done to Estelle, but regret that she was not to reap the fruits of them.

It is doubtful if she gave Thornton more than a passing thought. She believed his life was in imminent peril; but that did not concern her nearly so much as the question of her own and her daughter's safety. She had married Thornton as a part of a soulless plot to obtain possession of the Redcliffe property. Thornton carried the plot through successfully and she rewarded him, as she had agreed to do, by giving him her hand in marriage. It is needless to say that her affections did not go with it.

Bitter indeed was the draught now held to her lips. A consciousness of wrong-doing is not self-sustaining; and when that wrong-doing meets with failure and just retribution, as it inevitably will sooner or later, it drags its victim into the lowest depths of despair and anguish. This anguish and despair Mrs. Thornton was now realizing. Her perjuries, her scheming, her brazen self-seeking had come to naught.

Her hands shook so that she could scarcely fasten the shawl-strap, and her form trembled as with an ague.

She did not stop to replace the other articles in the trunk, but hurried to her dressing-case and took from it some jewelry and a small roll of money.

Then she hastened to the office of the Redcliffe Mine. Thornton had given her the combination of the safe one day, and she soon had the heavy door open. There was a large quantity of money in the safe in coin and bills. She took the bills, but left the coin, as being too bulky to carry, and returned to the house.

The shouts and cries of the mob far up the street added wings to her feet. She feared they might descend upon the house at any moment, and cut off all chances of escape.

Probably, if they had done so, they would not have harmed the women or damaged the house. But Mrs. Thornton was in too incoherent a state to reason correctly. The advance of the mob would have been to her as the knell of doom.

Sally was weeping and tremblingly arraying herself in clothing suitable for flight. She had a few treasures and a lot of "pretty pretties," valueless in themselves, but dear to her because of associations clustering about them. These she had carefully collected and placed on a chair.

"What do you want to take all that trash with you for?" exclaimed Mrs. Thornton, sweeping the mass to the floor and scattering it with one blow of her hand. "We haven't room for gim-cracks now!"

Sally burst into a flood of tears. Her heart was already full to overflowing, and this superadded weight was more than it could bear.

"Now, stop your sniffing," commanded Mrs. Thornton. "We've got to hurry, if we get away from here at all. The mob will be here, no doubt, in a little while, and then we can't go."

Sally, still weeping, essayed to obey. Her mother, meanwhile, hurried to the stable, placed saddles and bridles on two of the best horses, and got them in readiness for the contemplated journey. Having done this she carried out the bundles and strapped them behind the saddles.

By this time Sally was dressed and ready. She had also availed herself of her mother's temporary absence to secrete some of the beloved trinkets in the bosom and pocket of her dress.

"Come on!" screamed Mrs. Thornton.

"Don't dawdle all day!"

It was with a strange fluttering and sinking of the heart that Sally descended the steps of the Redcliffe mansion for the last time.

Then she mounted the horse assigned to her, and the two women turned their backs on Table Mountain and rode away.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THORNTON'S DESPAIR.

"GONE!"

For a moment the mob was speechless with amazement.

"Why should he fly, if his cause is just?" demanded Bildad, shrewdly profiting by the lull. "Does that not go to prove that my charges are truthful? He tries to take advantage of you when your minds are heated by passion, but retreats as soon as you become cool enough to reason for yourselves!"

A series of angry howls came as replies to the speech.

"Now, I charge you as reasonable men, do nothing rashly!" he urged, beginning to fear that the mad element he had turned against Thornton might prove again unmanageable. "Thornton is a base and daring violator of the law; let the law punish him. The law is sufficiently powerful to correct wrong if we will only stand by and sustain it."

To this there were loud cries of approval from the more conservative element of the mob, but the remainder would not be restrained. They were thirsting for blood and the destruction of human life would alone satisfy them.

This element at once scattered and began to search for Thornton, with an energy as mad as that with which they had pressed Bildad and Tony an hour before.

What of Thornton during all of this time?

He did not divine danger as readily and quickly as his wife had done; but he saw the drift of sentiment as a period sufficiently early to enable him to leave the crowd.

In accomplishing this he met with little difficulty. All eyes were turned upon Bildad, and all ears strained to catch his lightest word. There was, also, a great deal of shifting and moving about among the restless throng. Men were crowding into better positions, and this was accompanied by the inevitable confusion and jostling which always attends such efforts.

Although he was personally well-known to almost every one there, it was only necessary for him to pull his hat low over his eyes to avoid attention and detection.

Once clear of the throng he hurried into a deserted alley, and for some time stood debating what course to pursue.

It was a difficult question to decide. He was loth to give up the property he had risked so much to obtain. And yet he did not see how he could now hold it. The possession of Redcliffe's will gave all the advantage to the other side. He might fight the case in the courts, deny the genuineness of the document, and endeavor to again bribe his way through. But the chances were that he would fail.

Then there was the fear of arrest and punishment, to restrain him from this attempt. And more threatening than all, at this particular juncture, the rage of a senseless mob. He feared the law, but he feared the mob most; and between the two he seemed quite undone.

At present only one course appeared to be open to him. He would hasten home, secure the ready money in the safe and leave the country for a time. He could thus, with safety to himself, await the development of events. He told himself that Mrs. Thornton and Sally would be in no danger by remaining for awhile in Table Mountain; and they could, by carefully guarded letters, keep him advised as to the course of his enemies.

Possibly the evidence against him would not be so conclusive as appeared at first sight. Perhaps even the will, which Bildad had waved so defiantly, was forged. In a week affairs might look better than now.

With these thoughts he made his way through the alley, intending to reach home by a circuitous and little-traveled route.

Great was his surprise and rage on leaving the alley, to find that his flight had been discovered or suspected and that he was being followed.

Some curious individual had noticed him withdraw from the crowd and slip into the alley, and thinking it strange that any one should act that way, at such a time, had dogged his footsteps.

The man had waited until fully convinced that the person retreating was Thornton. Satisfied of this, he now rushed forward, revolver in hand, thinking if he made the capture alone it would be quite a feather in his cap.

"Halt, there!" he commanded. "Halt, or I'll put a bullet into you."

He was quite near Thornton, and thrust the revolver almost into the fugitive's face as he spoke.

At that moment Thornton was a desperate and dangerous man. To be captured meant a horrible and ignominious death, probably, and he did not intend to be captured. If he must die, he would die battling for his liberty.

"Halt!" yelled the man again, using a terrible oath to emphasize the command.

Thornton decided upon a course of action that was at once bold and simple. He knew that, in Western parlance, the man "had the drop on him" and could slay him if he wished, and would slay him if he attempted an open resistance.

"I give in!" he cried, coming to a full stop and turning about to face his pursuer. "You've got me, and I've sense enough to know it."

"Lucky ye have!" cried the fellow, congratulating himself on his easy victory, and taken completely off his guard. "Now, if you'll march along in front o' me, quiet-like, I'll not hurt ye."

He still held the cocked revolver, but did not have it leveled and in readiness for a shot.

Thornton moved toward him with head down, as if completely cowed. When just opposite, however, and within arm's length, he leaped full at the throat of his would-be captor, struck the revolver from his grasp and closed with him.

The man was taken completely by surprise. He made an obstinate struggle, though, and for a time victory wavered in the balance.

They were very evenly matched in strength. But Thornton had the advantage of the onset and he maintained it. Linked together, they swayed and writhed and twisted, each struggling desperately to throw the other. Once or twice Thornton was pressed back until it seemed he must fall. But through it all he never relaxed his grip of his opponent's throat.

The fellow tried in vain to break that desperate grip. Thornton, battling for life as he believed, clung like a bull-dog. The pressure choked and weakened the man; and at last, with a great exertion of strength, Thornton was enabled to throw him.

They fell together, like the down-crashing of forest trees. Thornton fell on top of his foe, almost crushing the life from the man's body.

"I give up!" he gurgled, feebly. "Don't stick me! I give up!"

"You hell-bound!" panted Thornton. "I've a good notion to beat your brains out with your own revolver. You would drive me back to be torn to pieces by that crazy mob, would you?"

"I give up!" moaned the unhappy wretch. "What more kin I do?"

"You can go back and tell your master, Bildad Barnacle, that I defy him! Tell him, for me, that he is an unmitigated liar and that I will prove him so in the courts. Now, you can go; and if you attempt to follow me again, I will shoot you like a wolf."

A portion of this was mere bravado. He was compelled to release the man. He could not stay there and guard him, if he so desired; and he had nothing with which to bind him. He had to release him or kill him, and he did not care to do the latter.

He secured the man's revolver, before permitting him to arise. Then he pointed up the street and cried, savagely:

"Go! before I'm tempted to kill you!"

The fellow lost no time in obeying the command.

"Now, I must change my course to throw him off the track!" muttered Thornton, darting into another alley. "He will go right back to the mob, and there will be a hundred men after me in less than thirty minutes!"

He rushed through this alley and on gaining another parallel street ran like the wind toward home.

His first thought was of his money, and he bounded into the office to secure it. To his amazement the safe-door stood open—for Mrs. Thornton had been in too big a hurry to relock it.

A glance showed that the bills were gone.

"That rascal, Tony, has robbed the safe, too!" he gasped, seizing an old shot-bag and hastily scooping the coin into it.

Then he remembered that the safe was closed when he visited the office at noon in search of Tony. And Tony had certainly had no opportunity for returning since that time. No one else but Mrs. Thornton knew the combination!

A painful suspicion flitted through his mind, as he recalled this fact.

He closed and locked the safe and hurried

with feverish speed toward the house. It was ominously silent. He entered the living room, then the parlor, and finally passed into the dining-room and kitchen. No one was there.

His worst suspicions were confirmed. Mrs. Thornton and Sally had fled and left him to his fate! A groan of anguish and despair came from his lips. Every plank of hope was being torn from beneath his feet.

"My God! this is terrible!" he exclaimed, wiping his fevered face. "They have deserted me just when I most needed their aid and counsel. I wouldn't have believed that of Mrs. Thornton."

Their heartlessness touched him deeply.

"And to think what I have done for them! what crimes I have committed; what risks I have run."

As he recalled these things the fire of indignation burned in his eyes.

"Yes; curse them! They're just like all women. They'll stand by you as long as the weather is fair and the money holds out. Then they'll leave you to shift for yourself, not caring whether you live or die. Ten thousand curses on them, I say!"

He strode up and down the narrow limits of the room, stamping and raging like a disappointed fiend.

Suddenly he recalled the fact that he was in personal and immediate danger.

"I'll have to give up everything!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Everything, if I save my life! And is it worth saving, under the circumstances? I must leave Table Mountain and start anew in some other land and among strangers. How hard that is, only those who have tried it know."

He began again to pace up and down restlessly.

A yell from the direction of the town gave him an uncomfortable start, and turned his thoughts again toward flight.

"I must go!" he cried, leaving the room and hastening toward the stable.

Into this he dashed. The best horses, as he had suspected would be the case, were gone from their stalls. He pitched a saddle upon the nearest and tightened the cinches. The bridles that had been hanging there had been taken by Mrs. Thornton and Sally, and he was forced to begin a search for another.

By the time he had found one and placed it over the horse's head, he heard heavy footsteps in the yard.

"I must go at once!" he whispered, paling visibly.

He vaulted into the saddle, bent his head low to avoid striking it against the cross-beams of the stable, and spurred the horse into a run.

CHAPTER XIX.

CONCLUSION.

BUT, Jack Thornton was not to escape. As his horse leaped through the stable a hand grasped its bridle-rein and jerked it back upon its haunches. It was the heavy hand of Bildad Barnacle, the conquering Hercules!

"Not so fast, my fine fellow!" the detective exclaimed. "There is a little account you will have to settle before leaving Table Mountain."

With a hoarse cry, Thornton drew a revolver and fired at the detective. The latter sprang quickly to one side, as he did so, and the bullet buried itself harmlessly in the ground.

Then Bildad leaped up like a tiger and dragged Thornton from his horse.

There was a sound of hurrying footsteps and the advance guard of the mob poured through the little garden and surrounded the two.

Thornton shrieked with terror as he saw them.

"They will not hurt you, I promise you!" cried Bildad, deftly slipping a pair of handcuffs on Thornton's wrists. Their cold touch and the ominous click made him start and cower.

"I pledge you my word that they shall not hurt you while I'm alive. I never yet gave up a prisoner to a mob and I don't intend to now, bad as you are."

"Not that it wouldn't serve you right. It would; for the part you took against me to-day, as well as what you've done to that poor girl."

The mob was clamorous, as all mobs are, and demanded that Thornton should be strung up without delay.

Bildad made them a speech, in which he counseled moderation and closed by declaring that he would not yield up the prisoner.

Then he drew his heavy revolver and boldly marched Thornton to the little jail, in which Estelle and her lover were still confined.

Before the sun had set these two were again enjoying liberty. The number of men who now stepped forward and volunteered to become bondsmen for them was surprising.

"It's too much the way of the world!" remarked Bildad. "When you are successful or victorious, thousands are ready to applaud and assist you, who would not have ventured even to speak to you so long as you were covered with the gloom of defeat. Most men are by nature hero-worshippers."

The cases against the young people were promptly dismissed, for, when pressed to the wall, Jack Thornton made a full confession, which revealed the nature of the dastardly plot against Estelle. The case against Fanshaw, for attempting to release her, was *nollied* at the same time, nobody being found willing, under the circumstances, to press it.

As for Thornton, he was, in due course, brought to trial for his villainy. He confessed everything and threw himself on the mercy of the court. Notwithstanding that, he was given a sentence of ten years at hard labor. He was released not long since, by expiration of his term of imprisonment, but he is a worn and broken man, whom no friend of his earlier days would be able to recognize.

As for Mrs. Thornton and her daughter, they were never again seen in Table Mountain. It was reported that they rode straight to Deadwood, and there took the stage for the East. Bildad did not care to follow them, and so they were never brought to trial.

Probably the large-hearted detective thought that their mental sufferings and humiliation would be sufficient punishment; and, in consideration of their sex, permitted them to go unmolested.

Estelle also pleaded in their behalf, declaring that the marriage feast would be robbed of its joys and the honeymoon of its sweetness if she knew that Mrs. Thornton and Sally were behind prison walls and suffering as she had suffered.

And the wedding, which joined Estelle Redcliffe for life to John Fanshaw, the man of her choice!—it was a wedding such as Table Mountain had never witnessed. The old mansion was aglow with lights. There was music and dancing. There was feasting and mirth. And of all the guests no one enjoyed it as did the noble and lion-hearted Bildad.

And Bildad was, as he deserved to be, the hero of the hour; with his son Marshal Lester, *alias* Tony Adams, ranking but little lower. For, be it known, that Bildad Barnacle, was none other than Talbot Lester, the noted mountain detective.

There was another there, weak and worn, but with a radiant face, who has not yet been personally introduced to the reader.

This was Frank Redcliffe, Estelle's only brother.

He it was who had sent Talbot Lester and his detective son to Table Mountain to fight Estelle's battles.

He had been a wanderer for several years. About the time of his father's death, tired of his aimless, roving existence, he had started homeward. On the way, he had been stricken down with a fever that brought him very near to the grave.

When he was convalescent he chanced to learn from a Deadwood paper, of his father's death, and of the disinheritance of his sister and himself. A full account of the case was given as a sensational item of news.

He at once summoned Talbot and Marshal Lester, and requested them to go to the scene of action and begin the fight against Thornton, using their own style and methods.

The results, as the reader has seen, were most gratifying.

"For all of which," young Redcliffe said, at the close of the wedding festivities, "let's give three cheers for Bildad Barnacle, the Detective Hercules!"

They were given with a will; and the reader, I feel sure, will echo them in his heart.

THE END.

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